

Preying on hope

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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At the turn of the century, and influenced by his distrust of Western medicine, then-president Thabo Mbeki lost the plot. Amid much media coverage, he proclaimed that HIV didn't cause Aids. We also had a health minister, now presidential hopeful, who espoused African potato and garlic as a means to delay the development of HIV into "Aids-defining conditions". Thankfully saner minds have prevailed, and South Africa now has a fairly comprehensive antiretroviral programme in place.



Professor Kaymanthri Moodley, director, Centre for Medical Ethics & Law, Stellenbosch University. Photo: YouTube

South Africa is not alone in falling for pseudoscience that preys on the hope to people living with HIV. Africa has a rich and contentious history of HIV cure approach that range from mythology, cultural beliefs and religion to alternative and traditional medications, according to Professor Keymanthri Moodley, director, Centre for Medical Ethics & Law, Stellenbosch University.

The issue is complicated further when scientists with pretty respectable credentials lend credence to these 'cures'. For example, Professor Girish Kotwal, resigned from his position as head of medical virology at UCT for punting an unregistered herbal product, Secomet V, as a treatment for Aids, following an [exposé in Nature magazine](#) in 2006. Two patients, who had opted for Secomet V as an alternative to conventional treatment, died of liver failure in a Stellenbosch Aids hospice at the time.

Then, there's the case of Nigerian surgeon turned immunologist, Dr Jeremiah Abalaka, who claimed to have developed a vaccine using blood to cure HIV in 2000. It was banned by the country's government, but [a recent high court decision lifted the ban](#).

"The [Gini coefficient](#) and an unequal society makes people vulnerable to quackery," Moodley says. She also cautioned journalists about reckless reporting on so-called HIV cures. "Journalists have an equal responsibility to 'first do no harm'."

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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