

Fifty years of building a healthy nation through research and innovation

On 1 July 2019, the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) celebrated its 50th anniversary. The SAMRC is delivering on its mandate to improve the lives of South Africans through conducting and funding research.

Having come into being during the dark days of apartheid, the SAMRC once embodied the cruel exclusionary policies for black Africans and women that were enforced by the government of the day. Its early research did not place emphasis on the diseases of poverty and forced migration. The SAMRC fortunately adapted to the changing South Africa (SA), and from the early 1990s prioritised the concept of equal opportunities, fast-tracking the employment of black South Africans. Our council was the first science council to have a fully transformed board by 1997, and appointed its first black African president and CEO in 1998. Fast forward to 2019, and we have an organisation led by a woman scientist. In place are transformation strategies that promote diversity, ensuring our trajectory to have the SAMRC reflecting the demographics of our country.

The SAMRC is proud of the progression of women in health research. At present, 69% of our employees are female, 46% of whom are in senior management. This is a far cry from 50 years ago. In addition to this, from an extramural perspective, we have transformed our research funding to ensure transformation and encourage diversity and capacity development, with a focus of prioritising investment in historically disadvantaged institutions.

The SAMRC has continued to renew and revitalise its research programme based on the health needs and priorities of the country. The country-specific health research priorities are primarily based on burden-of-disease data. Our research outputs provide the country with high-quality health demographic data and statistics to inform appropriate interventions that impact positively on the lives of South Africans. Our research has also resulted in innovative gene discoveries, and the first ever HIV vaccine trial to be conducted on the continent.

We have prioritised the most vulnerable people in our country, and have conducted research that will inform strategies to empower them. Our research resulted in the reduction of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and our development of technology that evaluates placental



Dr Zwelini Mkhize, honourable Minister of Health, and Professor Glenda Gray, President and CEO of the South African Medical Research Council.

blood flow in the last trimester, the Umbiflow device, has been shown to reduce perinatal mortality by over 50% in a pilot study. Its scale-up may reduce the stillbirth rate in our country.

Over the past 50 years, we have been innovative, from commissioning the magnetic resonance imager in 1985 as the first functioning unit in Africa, to the recent launch of the SAMRC-BGI genomics laboratory, so that for the first time we can do whole-genome sequencing on African soil.

The articles in this supplement demonstrate the SAMRC's pursuit of excellence in research and innovation. Research over the past 50 years has spanned the gamut of activities, from infectious diseases such as HIV and tuberculosis, to non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes, to health systems, infant mortality, environmental health, climate change and malaria, as well as activities promoting healthy lifestyle choices, including work on alcohol and drug abuse.

Prof. Glenda Gray

President and CEO: South African Medical Research Council