

KZN-trained Prof Mayosi remembered as a selfless hero and exemplary healthcare pioneer

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The late Prof Bongani Mayosi has been remembered in Durban as an exceptional person, a hero and colossal figure who became a medical student at the age of 16, and went on to be a respected scientist who could have made millions and lived anywhere in the world - but remained loyal to his country and its people. And even when perched in the high echelons of academia, he still sided with poor students during the #FeesMustFall movement.

The world-renowned cardiologist – who led a team of researchers at the University of Cape Town who discovered the gene that causes heart attacks - took his life on Friday, 27 July 2018, aged 51. He was the Dean of Health Sciences at the UCT and an A-rated cardiologist, and was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe, the country's highest honour, in 2009.

Yesterday, at an emotion-filled memorial service held at his alma mater, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, former colleagues, classmates, friends – such as Deputy Health Minister Dr Joe Phaahla, KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo and Amajuba District Mayor Dr Musa Ngubane – described Prof Mayosi as a highly driven and selfless individual whose passion for scientific innovation was only matched by his commitment to transformation in academia, and Black academic.

MEC Dhlomo expressed his sadness that Prof Mayosi had demised before the establishment of a new think tank, the African Institute of Health Leaders, which he had committed to being part of.

The MEC remembered Mayosi as a committed young scholar and political activist who worked closely freedom fighters such as the late Andrew Zondo, who was executed by the state in 1986. It was hardly surprising, the MEC said, when Mayosi went on to become an internationally respected academic. *“He was part of us when we held night vigils when we protested against the hanging of ANC leaders who were fighting for our freedom. He was part of us when we hired a bus when we went to Cape Town to launch the UDF. As much as he was a political activist, he made his mark as an astute academic in the medical field, both as an undergraduate and post-graduate. He continued being a mentor, researcher and role model recognized locally and internationally. “I was privileged to receive a letter from Bongani early in June, agreeing to serve in a programme we’re initiating, called African Institute of Health Leaders. Prof Mayosi, a clinical and researcher par excellence was equally aware that we need this cadre to innovate in health systems,” he said.*

Speaking on behalf of National government, Dr Phaahla, who left the university just as Prof Mayosi was starting, said: *“I believe that Bongani’s short life confirms that people of a special breed, the geniuses of our world, tend not to be on earth for a long time. In his short 51 years, Bongani contributed to SA and made so many achievements that many of us who will likely live longer than him can only appreciate in envy. Having entered medical school at such a young age and completed at 22, it’s almost like he knew he didn’t have a lot of time, and had to make all those achievements. Having come through during the period of apartheid, he broke through many barriers at the time, and he continued to make a number of achievements in the new South Africa that he fought for. “I’m here to say to the family, and to all friends and colleagues, on behalf of the health fraternity, our Government and indeed and the people of South Africa, we are very grateful. We consider him a giant. A giant of SA medicine, a giant of science of science and research, and a giant of teaching. He may have had a small figure as we all know, but we believe his contribution is colossal. He was a true public servant. When our president talks about Thuma Mina, Bongani had already answered the call long ago. And despite his heavy responsibilities, he never shied away from additional public service responsibilities, and that is the mark of a true leader.”*

Classmate Dr Mergen Naidoo, from the class of 89, was one of those who carried a 22 year-old Prof Mayosi aloft after he had scored five merit awards in his final year at the then University of KwaZulu-Natal. *“He was extremely popular in class. Students who struggled would go to him and he would always help them. Even at a young age, we always knew Bongani was destined for greatness. It was sad to learn that he had passed on the day of the eclipse of the moon. “His research interests were pursued in areas that affected the poor of this country. His death is a great loss not only his family, friend and colleagues, but to the whole country. He was a friend, a mentor and research collaborator. He had gravitas and a scholarly spirit. His kindness shone through his very being.”* This solemn gathering also saw the spotlight fall on the scourge of mental illness, particularly depression which, it was argued, must be acknowledged as a disease.

“It is fitting that at Bongani’s memorial service we talk about mental health, a scourge that affects us all, young and old, men and women. Don’t matter the colour of your skin. About 20% will have this illness. It’s time we spoke about it. It’s time we spoke about what we can do about it,” said Prof Bonga Chiliza, UKZN’s Head of the Department of Psychiatry.



and Lumka Mbuli light a candle in remembrance of Prof Bongani Mayosi.



MEC Dhlomo, with Dr Brian Vezi, Dr Joe Phaahla, Dr Musa Ngubane and Prof Busi Ncama.



MEC

Dhlomo, Dr Brian Vezi, Dr Joe Phaahla



MEC

Dhlomo, Dr Joe Phaahla

His sentiments were echoed by fellow psychiatry expert Dr Suvira Ramlal, who said: *"It is our responsibility to end the conspiracy of silence regarding suicide by responding to the horrible statistics of mental illness and mortality and morbidity from suicide within the medical fraternity. The reality is that depression kills. As Steve Jobs, who himself was facing imminent death, said, death is life's change agent. No loss, especially one of this magnitude, should be in vain. Prof Mayosi specialised in cardiology, a discipline dedicated to matters of the heart; an organ that is not just symbolic of life, but also of love, compassion and care. A media headline in 2015 announcing his appointment at UCT said, 'Bongani Mayosi: Healing Hearts, Making History.' And perhaps it is healing hearts and legitimising mental illness that must be his parting legacy. While he stood in the bright spotlight, he succumbed to an illness that lurks in the shadows of mainstream medicine, stigmatised and still fighting for recognition as a legitimate illness – despite being the second biggest contributor to the disease burden globally, and being responsible for death by suicide of up to 400 doctors annually, in the US alone. Men must die, but death cannot kill their views. Prof Mayosi's death, both in nature and timing, may be the wake-up call that the medical fraternity needs to address our ailing and failing approach to mental healthcare."*

Brian Vezi, a fellow cardiologist and UKZN alumni said despite being close to Prof Mayosi, he never saw his death coming. *"Like all of us, when I heard the news... it's indescribable, numbing. I was very upset with him. How could he do this? He was a force behind a lot of people. He was clear that things had to be changed. The socio-diversity of this country has to be changed. Bongani did not commit suicide. He died of depression. If you commit, you're doing something wilfully. I don't Bongani made a rational and wilful decision to die."*

Prof Ncoza Dlova, Associate Professor, Chief Specialist and Head of Department of Dermatology at the Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine, posed a challenge to university heads of department to preserve and advance Prof Mayosi's legacy. *"We must all ask ourselves this question: what we doing to carry Bongani's legacy for transformation? Are we seeing the change? You as a head of Department, what are you doing about transformation... to make sure the demographics are represented? Use your power to empower others. Don't give us excuses that you can't find Africans. Come to us, we'll help you find them. Don't set the incubator too high. The eggs will get rotten. Don't make it too cold, the eggs won't hatch."*

Prof Mayosi's cousin, Lumka Mbuli, said life has been difficult for the family, but thanked everyone who has supported the family in the wake of his death. She urged all to continue praying for the family.

Prof Mayosi will be laid to rest in a special provincial official funeral in Cape Town on Saturday.