

**Statement on Comments by former President Thabo Mbeki on HIV and AIDS
Delivered at UNISA on Wednesday, September 21, 2022.**

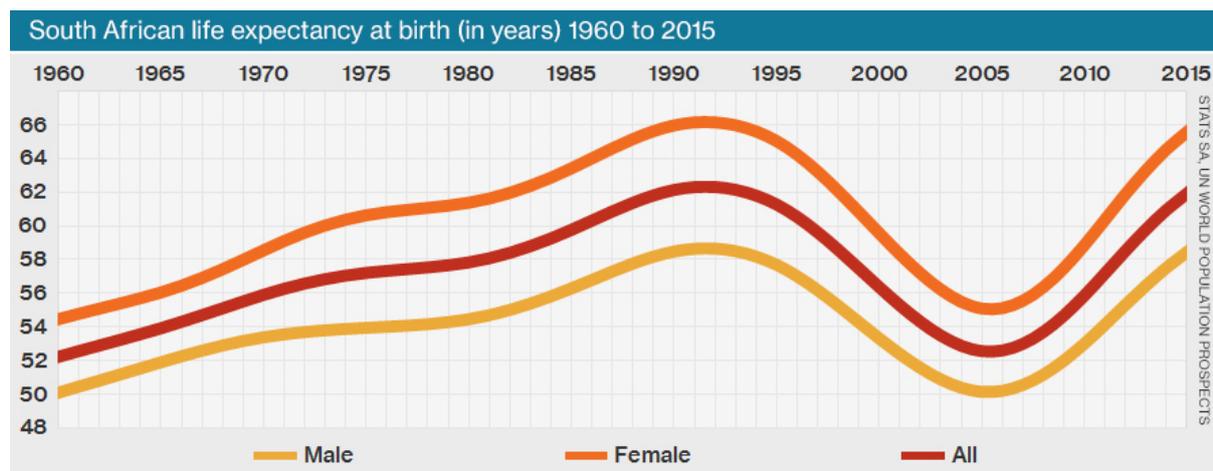
South Africa has endured a period of great illness, death and the loss of economic value over the last couple of years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

That we have come through the worst of the pandemic is in no small part due to the dedication of the country's health workers, public health specialists and scientists who responded above and beyond the call of duty and brought to bear all the strained public health resources and science-based evidence at their disposal to protect the country from the ravages of the pandemic.

While the government's own efforts evoke strong views as to their effectiveness, there was, at least, a public acknowledgement at the highest levels of the government of the scientific basis for understanding and managing the pandemic. This played a huge role in preventing the intense efforts of anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theorists and denialists from damaging the response.

Inevitably, the massive shift of resources and the health system's focus on managing the pandemic resulted in an unfortunate neglect of the large and generally well-established programmes on HIV/AIDS, TB and other chronic diseases. The race to bring those programmes back to at least pre-pandemic levels is long and arduous, but vital.

How disappointing, then, that former President Mbeki chose this moment to resurrect discredited propositions on HIV and AIDS. His administration's ambiguity on the role of HIV causing AIDS resulted in a decline in life expectancy from 62 years in 1994 to 52.5 years by 2005. His comments at UNISA ([link](#)) will certainly fuel the latent stigma and denialism that health professionals, scientists, NGOs and civil society have worked so hard to mitigate and place more than five and half million of the approximately eight million patients living with HIV on long-term, life-saving antiretroviral therapy.



The eventual roll-out of antiretroviral therapy to manage HIV/AIDS after his presidency reversed life expectancy to 1994 levels by 2015, a welcome reversal but an important reminder of the loss of time and opportunity that the years of denialism brought about.

To have made these comments at an institution of higher learning, where President Mbeki is invested as Chancellor, makes a dispiriting commentary even more egregious. The tortured explanation he offered, replete with a poor grasp of the scientific nomenclature, is no different to his posture when he denied the existence of HIV and that it caused AIDS. That he chose to make these remarks after years of remaining silent is simply shocking. His comments also come in an era of social media, through which young people may view him as an 'influencer' and potentially propagate his views, with serious aggravating consequences.

We strongly urge him to desist from further expounding publicly on this matter in a way that reverses the gains the country has made in managing this most heavy burden of HIV/AIDS and from abusing academic platforms to peddle unscientific fringe theories that can only serve to confuse those who are, or may be at risk of, those living with HIV and AIDS.

Issued by:

The Academy of Science of South Africa
27 September 2022

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SA Medical Research Council
Progressive Health Forum
SA Committee of Medical Deans
SA Medical Association
HIV Clinicians Society
Treatment Action Campaign
Section 27