

Professor Helen Rees

Professor Helen Rees is internationally recognised as an award-winning global health practitioner who has dedicated her professional career to improving public health in Africa, with a focus on vaccine-preventable diseases, HIV and sexual and reproductive health.

Professor Rees is the Executive Director at Wits RHI, the largest Academic Research Institute at the University of Witwatersrand, which she founded nearly 30 years ago. Wits RHI has over 2500 staff and a national, regional, and global footprint and is a World Health Organisation (WHO) and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Collaborating Centre.

Professor Rees is a Personal Professor in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Wits University, and she received her Medical Degree and Masters in Social and Political Sciences from Newhall College (now Murray Edwards College), Cambridge University, where she is an Honorary Fellow. She is an Honorary Professor in the Department of Clinical Research at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Professor Rees completed the Senior Executive Programme for Southern Africa at Harvard Business School. She is the Co-Founder and Co-Director of the African Local Initiative for Vaccinology Expertise (ALIVE) Consortium, a Wits University flagship programme.

During apartheid, Professor Rees was a human rights and health activist. She received the South African National Order of the Baobab in 2015 for her contribution to the health sector in general and to maternal and child health specifically. Most recently, Harvard Public Health named Professor Rees a 'standout voice' in African public health. Professor Rees received an Honorary Doctorate of Science (Medicine) from the University of London in 2020 (conferred in 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), awarded to 'persons of eminence and distinction'.

Professor Rees is the Board Chairperson of the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA), a position she has held since its inception in 2018. She Chairs the World Health Organisation's AFRO Region Immunization Technical Advisory Group and the WHO's International Health Regulation Polio Emergency Committee. She is a member of the WHO IHR Emergency Committee on COVID-19, the WHO Expert Committee on COVID-19 vaccines, and WHO's Scientific and Technical Advisory Group on Infectious Hazards. She Co-Chairs the WHO SAGE Working Group on Ebola Vaccines.

Professor Rees has extensive knowledge of the regulatory-ethical interface, having been a member of the South African Ministerial Research Ethics Committee and is a co-author of South Africa's first Good Clinical Practice and Research Ethics Guidelines.

Her involvement with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation Board, numerous WHO and National Department of Health and South African COVID-19 Expert Committees have ensured that the benefits of vaccines in treating and eradicating disease remain at the forefront of medical care. She joined the many regional, and global voices calling for equitable global access to COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics and is a keen advocate for increasing research capacity in LMICs and the African region.

Her scholarly output record is impressive, with over 250 scientific academic publications, over 400 invited plenary and keynote addresses and contributing to the organisation of over 100 international and national conferences.

Professor Rees was highly active in the South African COVID-19 response, for which she received the South African Ministerial COVID-19 Special Award in the Platinum Category at the National Batho Pele Excellence Awards last year. In the same year, she also received the French Presidential award,

Officier de l'Ordre national du Mérite (Officer of the French National Order of Merit), in recognition of an outstanding medical career focused on sexual and reproductive health.

In 2001, Queen Elizabeth II made her an Officer of the British Empire for her contribution to global health.

Other honours bestowed on Professor Rees include the 2014 Harry Oppenheimer Fellowship, given to a leading scholar with a sustained record of outstanding research and intellectual achievement at the highest level. In 2012, the South African Medical Association honoured Prof Rees with a Lifetime Achievement Award for exceptional contribution to the South African health sector.

In 2015, she was awarded the South African National Science and Technology Foundations' Lifetime Achievement Award.

Professor Rees was the first person to receive the South African Department of Science and Technology's 'Distinguished Scientist Award for outstanding contribution to the improvement of the Quality of Life of Women' (2006).

She was awarded the Wits University Vice-Chancellor's Research Award in 2012, the University's highest research recognition. She received the University's Faculty of Health Sciences recognition for dedication and achievement in research in 2013.

In 2002 she was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award for her contribution to women and children's rights by Amanitare, a pan-African NGO that supports the rights of African women and children.

Professor Helen Rees' commendable contributions to science, global health, medicine and human rights make her worthy of a Doctor of Laws (LLD) (honouris causa) from Rhodes University. This award will be conferred at the Rhodes University graduation ceremony at 14h30 on 31 March 2023.