

# Passionate for science

By  Danette Breitenbach

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Science is an indication of a country's wealth, and the best indicator of a country's GDP and productivity is its scientific productivity. The investment of a country into science creates a healthy country and a healthy country is a wealthy country.



Glenda Grey, president of the South African Medical Research Council. Image © [Brand South Africa](#)

A huge believer of investing in science, because she has seen its results first hand, is Prof Glenda Gray, president of the SA Medical Research Council, the first woman to ever hold this position.

Prof Gray, who became a scientist because of a social problem, told delegates attending the Standard Bank Top Women Conference that took place at Emperors Palace in Gauteng, she always wanted to be a doctor. And because she liked children, she qualified as a paediatrician.

Within a year-and-a-half of working at Baragwanath Hospital with children and pregnant women, HIV exploded. "Every third child was HIV positive, making it the leading cause of death of children," she says.

This led her to design a study that examined the transmission of HIV from breast feeding. "By knowing what the risks of breastfeeding were, we could provide women with information that they could use to make an informed decision."

She stresses that this was about allowing women to make a choice, and not making it for them.

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The study taught her about the power of science and this is what led her to become a scientist. “The evidence we gathered helped us to provide the right information and interventions to the women.”

Previously, she believed that science was only for clever people.

“ I learned science is for curious people, not clever people. Clever people know the answers, scientists ask questions to find solutions. I witnessed the power of science and how it can change lives. The study we did increased life expectancy by nine years. ”

However, science still today is very much perceived as the domain of men. In this context, her appointment as the first president of the Council was ground breaking. She says her understanding of science and her background have helped her to navigate what is required by complex position.

“I grew up poor and on the wrong side of the railway tracks, as they say. But my father was very progressive and my brother a member of the National Union of South African Students (Nusas). We were exposed to people of different politics and our neighbours were always knocking on our door asking for a cup of sugar, just to see what was going on in the house.”

As a student, she also worked to desegregate hospitals by protesting and occupying them and was arrested for holding the administrative staff of a hospital hostage. “We worked with the National Health Education and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) to mobilise healthcare workers.”

This has led to her having a good relationship with the trade union today. “They call me Comrade President,” she says. It also gave her an understanding of the complex health issues in South Africa. “We have to understand the context in which disease happens in the country; how poverty affects people, especially women.”

Women, because of their position in society, are the most vulnerable group when it comes to HIV. “The HIV vaccine is the ultimate female empowerment and until that day women will remain the most susceptible to HIV in Africa. Women need to protect themselves. This is my passion.”

## ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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