

# Mbeki's mistake

South Africa's government has removed the minister most closely associated with public discussion of the country's HIV epidemic. But it must stand by its promises to implement a fresh AIDS strategy.

**T**he dismissal on 8 August of South Africa's deputy health minister, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, sends out an extremely negative message about how seriously the country is taking its monumental AIDS crisis (see page 739).

Madlala-Routledge was a driving force behind South Africa's first realistic national AIDS strategy, which sets out proposals to cut infection rates, improve diagnosis and treat the estimated 5.5 million South Africans already infected with HIV. The plan was endorsed by the South African National AIDS Council on 30 April (see *Nature* 447, 1; 2007).

President Thabo Mbeki claims that he asked for Madlala-Routledge's resignation because she travelled to an AIDS vaccine conference in Spain earlier in the year without receiving the required permission to make the trip. But no one believes this petty transgression to be the real issue. The fact of the matter is that Madlala-Routledge's direct and honest approach to AIDS and other health challenges had placed her on a direct collision course with both Mbeki and his health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang.

Sidelined earlier this year by medical problems, Tshabalala-Msimang has now returned to an active role in government, and is again championing the tragically misguided idea that food products such as beets are more useful for treating AIDS than antiretroviral drugs.

The deputy health minister — who is a substantial political figure in South Africa in her own right — says she thinks a factor in her dismissal was her speaking out on the shocking conditions she found in the maternity ward at Frere Hospital in East London when she visited it last month. Whatever the precise circumstances, it seems clear that Madlala-Routledge is a victim of her own outspokenness — and of the return of her boss, the health minister, to her desk.

Yet that outspokenness is exactly what is required of public-health officials in South Africa right now. The firing is a particularly bitter blow, because the fresh national AIDS strategy had given patients' advocates, scientists and doctors real hope that the nation would at last move from its failed approach of playing down the threat posed

by AIDS. Now, it is by no means clear that the strategy will be implemented in full.

Although he has refrained from speaking out on the topic lately, Mbeki has come close to embracing AIDS 'denialism' — the rejection of the hypothesis that HIV causes AIDS. In South Africa, this is often aligned with claims that antiretroviral drugs are more dangerous than HIV itself. The overall result of this view from the top is that South Africa, despite its relative prosperity, has been slower than other African nations in distributing medicines that would extend the lives of people who have HIV.

Denialism has also infected the wider South African public: in patient surveys, half of the South Africans who first tested positive for HIV in 2005 said that they had not believed themselves to be at risk of contracting HIV, according to UNAIDS. The UN agency also reports that almost a million South Africans who need antiretroviral drugs are not getting them — and that the epidemic in the country is yet to peak.

The dismissal of Madlala-Routledge augers very badly for South Africa's HIV/AIDS response. Under its previous incoherent strategy, the nation's public health has deteriorated. HIV/AIDS spurs epidemics of other diseases, such as extremely drug-resistant tuberculosis. It also undermines the heart of the health system by killing so many health workers.

The new AIDS strategy had signalled that South Africa's leaders were ready to take a new course — to work with patients, scientists, advocates and international organizations to confront HIV's destruction of their country's human and economic resources. The ministry of health has stated that despite the dismissal it will pull out "all stops" to implement the strategy. It is imperative that it does so. Madlala-Routledge's removal was a serious error of judgement; if the strategy now unravels, it will be a calamity for South African public health. ■

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## Division of labour

The European Research Council shouldn't be coy about saying who will get its first set of grants.

**T**he first Europe-wide research agency to distribute funding purely on the basis of scientific merit is working with commendable efficiency. Its officials have just ploughed through more than 9,000 first-stage applications for the inaugural programme of grants and asked 559 of them to submit a complete application. Around half of these shortlisted candidates will eventually win

five-year grants worth up to €400,000 (US\$550,000) per year.

The European Research Council (ERC) has done well to get so far within eight months of its official creation. But it is already facing criticism for its reluctance to reveal the exact distribution of nationalities on the shortlist. The ERC's decision to keep this information to itself for the time being can be read two ways: as a failure to be transparent or as a pragmatic response to a tricky political environment.

The ERC's mission is perhaps unprecedented in the brief history of the European Union (EU). It has to distribute large amounts of European money — building up to €1 billion a year within a few years — to the best research proposals, regardless of nationality or other political criteria. Both the EU member states and the

European parliament have fully signed up to this mission.

Nonetheless, the young agency's leadership can expect to take some political heat if, as is likely, most of its grants go to those EU countries that are already most established scientifically. A comparable dilemma has been encountered in the past by the US National Science Foundation (NSF), an agency that, perhaps more than any other, the ERC seeks to emulate. NSF grants have always flowed disproportionately to certain states, such as Massachusetts and California, where US scientific excellence is most heavily concentrated. The agency has dealt with the political challenge that this presents by publishing reams of relevant data upfront, while developing programmes (at the prompting of Congress) that assist researchers in the states that do less well with their applications. It has done this without compromising its criteria for grant selection.

One of the council's top priorities is to make sure that it establishes a reputation for excellence in its processes. It must do this to win the solid support of European scientists ahead of its first formal evaluation by the EU authorities, which will take place in just two years' time. For now, the council is still negotiating the details of the final EU executive agency within which it will eventually operate. Evaluation of grant proposals, meanwhile, is being overseen by a modest number of staff, most of whom have been seconded from national research agencies.

It is in this fragile context that the ERC is eager to avoid rocking political boats by publishing a national breakdown of who is being considered for its first grants. Instead, it has broken down the shortlist into the groups of nations that joined the EU at different stages of its evolution.

So it has revealed that 45% of the applicants, and 53% of the winners, come from Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands — the six original members of the European Economic Community, as it was then known. The nine countries that joined after 1973, but before the entry of the former communist states, account for 36% of applications and 27% of the winners. The 12 members who have joined since 2004 did not do so well, putting in 9% of the applications and winning 5%. (Nine 'associated countries', such as Russia and Israel, as well as participants from farther afield account for the rest of the applications.)

Policy-makers might benefit from fuller information about the geographical distribution of both those who apply and those who make the shortlist, if only as a snapshot of how excellence in European science is currently distributed.

And according to its mission statement, the ERC is "committed to providing public information about its activities in a transparent and timely manner". Ultimately, that commitment to transparency will have to override the council's concerns about giving offence.

EU politics, in its complexity and fickleness, is likely to pose challenges for the new research agency at some stage. But Europe needs the ERC to be openly committed to uncompromising selection of the best. Sooner, rather than later, the ERC needs to commit to full publication of data on its selection processes, to defend these processes to the full, and to let the political chips fall where they may. ■

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## Men [*sic*]

Our 1869 mission statement is out of date.

It was 1833 when the English polymath William Whewell first coined the word 'scientist'. Over subsequent decades, the word gradually replaced such commonly used terms as 'natural philosophers' and 'men of science'.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, this last phrase was already out of date: pioneering women such as Mary Fairfax Somerville and Caroline Herschel were proving their worth as astronomers, mathematicians, botanists and palaeontologists.

The original mission statement of this journal, first printed in *Nature's* second issue on 11 November 1869, was therefore running behind the times when it referred to "Scientific men" — even though, to be fair, the word 'scientist' did not enter general circulation until the end of the nineteenth century. In other respects it is well worded — which is why we print it every week in the Table of Contents.

The statement expresses two purposes for this publication. The first is "to place before the general public the grand results of Scientific Work and Scientific Discovery; and to urge the claims of Science to a more general recognition in Education and in Daily Life". Today this is as important as it has ever been — although members

of the public have important considerations to lay before scientists, and *Nature* reflects them also.

The second thrust was expressed as follows: "to aid Scientific men themselves, by giving early information of all advances made in any branch of Natural knowledge throughout the world, and by affording them an opportunity of discussing the various Scientific questions which arise from time to time."

In printing the statement verbatim every week as we have done, making it clear when it originated, we have hitherto assumed that readers will excuse the wording in the interests of historical integrity. But feedback from readers of both sexes indicates that the phrase, even when cited as a product of its time, causes displeasure. Such signals have been occasional but persistent, and a response is required.

There is a convention within the English language by which writers quoting text can indicate their view that a particular phrase is inappropriate. That is to insert *sic*, a Latin word meaning 'thus', after the phrase — in effect expressing the sentiment 'alas, dear reader, this is what was said'.

This is what we will do in the mission statement from now on. The small, belated change takes place against the vast backdrop of a scientific world where the upper echelons of academia, academies and prestigious awards are still numerically greatly dominated by men, and where outright discrimination can still rear its ugly head (see page 749). In this context, the insertion of a Latin word in a couple of paragraphs may be a tiny step: but it is at least one in the right direction. ■