Anthony Fauci and Salim S. Abdool Karim, key government health advisors for the United States of America and South Africa, awarded the 2020 John Maddox Prize for standing up for science during the coronavirus pandemic.

Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), and Salim S. Abdool Karim FRS, an infectious disease epidemiologist and director of the Centre for AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa, have jointly been awarded the 2020 John Maddox Prize in recognition of their work as prominent government advisors on health during the Covid-19 pandemic, and their exceptional communication of the science behind Covid-19 to the public and policymakers. An additional prize for someone considered to be early in their career was awarded to Anne Abbott, an Australian neurologist who determinedly challenged traditional medical treatment of carotid stenosis.

Anthony Fauci is receiving the prize in recognition of his work to help the public understand both the science behind complex and controversial public health issues, and how the nature of science influences government responses. While other government scientists have avoided the spotlight, he has steadfastly responded to questions from the public. In South Africa Salim S. Abdool Karim showed similar dedication. He has a reputation for clear and honest communication, something that has allowed him to generate public trust in fast-moving science. Respected for his international science advocacy, engaging with the media and the public has become integral to his role as a scientist. The enormous achievements of Karim and Fauci call back to their work tackling AIDS. Over 30 years ago, Fauci oversaw much of the US government’s medical response to the AIDS crisis, while in the early 2000s Karim was one of one of the scientists who spoke out against AIDS denialism.

Associate Professor Anne Abbott, a neurologist from the Central Clinical School at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia was awarded the early career prize for her perseverance in challenging traditional medical treatment of carotid stenosis, which can lead to strokes, and communicating new evidence that showed the potential to move away from unnecessary clinical interventions and procedures. Abbott encountered strong opposition as she attempted to publicise her research findings, but continued to challenge the status quo at personal cost, placing patients’ health and public knowledge first.

Now in its 9th year, the John Maddox Prize, a joint initiative of the charity Sense about Science and the scientific journal Nature, is awarded to one or two people a year for standing up for sound science in public.
The Maddox Prize 2020 received over 100 nominations from 34 different countries.

The prize is run and funded by Sense about Science, where Sir John Maddox was a founding trustee, and Nature, where he was editor for over 20 years, with support from Clare and Andrew Lyddon.

COMMENDATIONS

In response to COVID the judges would also like to recognise the extraordinary efforts to communicate the initial stages of the novel coronavirus both by Ai Fen and Li Wenliang. These doctors from Wuhan General Hospital went above and beyond to communicate their concerns about the presence of a novel Coronavirus, particularly when considering the positions they were in and consequences they were likely to face. They feel that both these doctors require recognition for this effort, Ai Fen in having initiated the communication to her colleagues and thereby ‘distributing the whistles’ and Li Wenliang’s efforts, as he was dying of COVID-19, to communicate to the world his treatment and suppression.

Judges commended the work of Donato Boscia, head of the Bari unit of the CNR Institute for Sustainable Plant Protection (IPSP) in Italy, for continuing to identify and explain the Xylella fastidiosa outbreak decimating the olive industry in Italy despite facing lawsuits and a smear campaign that he started the outbreak.

They commended the work of Lucas Garibaldi, Director of IRNAD, for his engagement with agribusiness in Argentina to explain the evidence for more sustainable farming practices.

They also commended the work of Brian Earp in the controversial field of genital cutting in children for taking a multi-disciplined, science-based approach to a deep-rooted cultural practice.

WINNERS’ COMMENTS

Salim Abdool Karim: “I am deeply honoured to receive the 2020 John Maddox Prize for Standing up for Science, jointly with Dr Anthony Fauci. Having scientifically challenged AIDS denialism over two decades, the Covid-19 pandemic turned out to be a much more complex challenge. Providing scientific advice on Covid-19 in the midst of uncertainty and anxiety proved to be a difficult path but one that was readily achieved by staying true to scientific evidence without bending to ideology or vested interests. Serving the public by promoting science, evidence and public discussion during two pandemics has been a privilege.”

Anthony Fauci: The other [thing that I have learnt] is to tell the truth at all times and do everything that is science-based and evidence-based. And sometimes the truth means saying ‘I do not know’

Anne Abbott: “My main feeling is one of relief – that I have been able to share something of the unexpected difficulties I have faced in simply doing my job as a patient advocate. There is also a sense of empowerment to address other barriers to improving patient outcomes globally. I am very glad the Maddox Prize initiative exists. It imparts new hope”

JUDGES’ COMMENTS

Tracey Brown OBE, director, Sense about Science: “The prize, by its nature, has typically focused on people who have not had recognition of their efforts to communicate science in difficult circumstances. This year the biggest scientific battles have been under a spotlight from politicians, the media, and the public, so as judges our considerations were different.

We have high expectations of people in public office, so we are recognising a standard above and beyond that. This crisis drew many advisers away into the corridors of decision making and official announcements. Instead, our joint winners took every opportunity to talk the public through uncertain and emerging science.”

Magdalena Skipper, editor-in-chief, Nature: “This year has demonstrated how critical it is for everyone that science be communicated clearly and accurately. As many are confronted with confusing, contradictory
and sometimes even false information, leaders who are able to convey the important messages clearly, can literally mean the difference between life and death. The Maddox Prize serves an important purpose in recognizing those who stand up for sound science and evidence. It is our pleasure to work with Sense about Science to recognize the roles that Anthony Fauci and Salim Abdool Karim have played in this pandemic and also that of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s."

Baron (Martin) Rees of Ludlow, OM, FRS, FREng, FMedSci, FRAS, University of Cambridge: "Retaining public confidence and academic integrity in the face of political pressures is a challenge, especially when the stakes are stratospherically high. Our winners achieved this and fully deserve public acclaim."

Natasha Loder, Journalist, The Economist: "This year, in the midst of a global health crisis there have been some dark days for truth, and reason. Sadly, this is not the first time that science has been tossed aside in the face of a pandemic: it happened during the HIV/AIDS outbreak decades ago. Both pandemics are notable for the lies that were told about the nature of the outbreak—sometimes by those in positions of great political power. This AIDS denialism of 20 years ago, finds parallels in those who say that covid-19 is no worse than the flu.

It takes brave individuals to stand up to powerful politicians. The efforts of Dr Karim and Dr Fauci embody the spirit of this prize, and the scientist it was named after. John Maddox was a passionate, tireless champion and defender of science. So too, Dr Karim and Dr Fauci."

Professor Terrence Forrester, Chief Scientist & Managing Director, UWI Solutions for Developing Countries at the University of the West Indies: "How much do we value those who risk a great deal in an effort to assure the availability of science for the value it brings to our world? Science is a source of evidence for myriad decisions in local and global life. When it is endangered, we greatly increase the chances of poor outcomes in those decisions."

Dennis Lo FRS, Director, Li Ka Shing Institute of Health Sciences: "The unprecedented challenges faced by the world in 2020 call for individuals with wisdom, resilience, and integrity. The remarkable winners of this year’s Maddox Prize exemplify such qualities in spades."

Anin Luo, early career biophysicist, Yale University: "This year’s nominations were strong and diverse, especially in the early-career category. Many of the nominated people risked careers and even livelihoods to stand up for science and evidence. In a time when the need for transparent evidence in policymaking is prominent, recognizing early-career researchers’ efforts is essential."

Dr Alan Finkel, Australia’s Chief Scientist: "I am pleased to see the recognition of an early career researcher who has focused on ensuring evidence is front and centre in treatment of medical conditions, especially those as prevalent as carotid arterial disease and stroke. I congratulate Associate Professor Abbott on her achievement."