

SAPRIN BIDS FAREWELL TO DIRECTOR AND CO-DIRECTOR

31 MARCH 2025

The [South African Population Research Infrastructure Network \(SAPRIN\)](#) bids farewell to its Director and Co-Director, Dr Kobus Herbst and Professor Mark Collinson. Their tenure at the [South African Medical Research Council \(SAMRC\)](#) ends today, 31 March 2025.

Dr Herbst and Professor Collinson have played a remarkable role in establishing SAPRIN. Kobus and Mark have been actively involved since the grant application phase of SAPRIN via the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation's [\(DSTI\)](#) South African Research Infrastructure Roadmap (SARIR). SAPRIN is funded by the DSTI and hosted by the SAMRC.



Dr Kobus Herbst



Professor Mark Collinson

In 2015, following a business plan and proposal, Professor Mark Collinson, together with Kobus was nominated to co-lead the development of SAPRIN. Since 2017 Kobus and Mark have been pivotal in driving the processes that have seen SAPRIN reach its current form, which consists of seven Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS) nodes, four rural and three urban, across the country.

Dr Herbst said, "After eight incredibly rewarding years, it's time for me to step down as Director of SAPRIN. It's hard to put into words what this journey has meant to me — but it has been one of purpose, learning, and connection. I want to express my deep gratitude to the incredible team that has supported me throughout this time: André, Tinofa, Linda, Roopa, Nosicelo, Yolanda, Zoh, and our dedicated interns, Mfundo and Augustine—thank you for your unwavering commitment, passion, and the many ways you've helped shape SAPRIN into the thriving network it is today."

Professor Collinson said, "In establishing SAPRIN as one of several national research infrastructures aiming to boost high-quality research in South Africa, the values underpinning the programme, like transformation, citizen participation, open science, and growing our own timber, were highly attractive to me. And it made SAMRC the ideal host organisation in which to build it. There are always wider goals than getting the science right, but this is a crucial part of societal development, and I feel privileged to have been part of the team setting up what SAPRIN and the SAMRC can contribute in this regard."

The combined expertise and knowledge of Kobus and Mark contributed towards creating a national infrastructure that now has a diverse research footprint with a population of 588,242. The seven HDSS nodes collect

longitudinal health and demographic data in their respective nodes using a common and standard research protocol.

“To the nodal directors—Steve, Joseph, Collins, David, Hannah, Nompu, and Geoffrey—thank you for embracing the vision of a research infrastructure rooted in equity and impact. Your leadership has helped shape SAPRIN into a powerful platform for advancing health and social wellbeing in communities that have too often been overlooked. I’m also deeply grateful to the SAMRC leadership—Liesl, Ntobeko, and Glenda—for their invaluable guidance and steadfast support,” emphasised Dr Herbst.

The pair’s sterling work received acclaim when they jointly received the prestigious National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF)-South32 Award in the Data for Research category in July 2020. This earned them recognition for the conceptualisation and development of SAPRIN. Dubbed the ‘Science Oscars’, the NSTF recognises outstanding contributions to science, engineering, technology and innovation. About receiving the award Professor Collinson said, “The greatest aspect of this award was being recognised by our peers in other organisations.”

Doctor Herbst, a medical doctor is a public health medicine specialist who has played a significant role in establishing the post-apartheid health system in the early 1990s. He was instrumental in creating and implementing the Regional Health Management Information System (ReHMIS), the first computerised inventory system for public healthcare facilities in South Africa. He has developed the information system for the Agincourt HDSS and assisted with the establishment of the now DIMAMO Population Health Research Centre. He is the Director of Population Science at the Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI). Kobus was elected as the interim steering committee chair of the African Population Cohorts Consortium (APCC) last year.

Professor Collinson is a Reader in Population and Public Health at the SAMRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit (Agincourt), within the School of Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand. He played a key role in establishing the SAMRC/Wits Agincourt Health and Demographic Surveillance System in rural Mpumalanga in 1992. Additionally, he has led the INDEPTH Migration, Urbanisation and Health Working Group from 2003 - 2020.

Reflecting on the importance of longitudinal data, Professor Collinson explained, “Researchers would always use longitudinal data if they could, because a data point on its own may be a bit suspicious, but usually such data are confined to small sample sizes. SAPRIN has the unique ability to have longitudinal data at the scale of a small district, made even more interesting by there being multiple comparable population nodes.”

Professor Collinson added that, “Growing our own timber is an aspiration of the South African government to counterbalance broadscale inequality that exists in a post-colonial world. Hence, SAPRIN’s data needs to be accessible and supported by good training on how to use it to address the needs of here and now.”

Dr Herbst had a special word of thanks for his institution, the Africa Health Research Institute, that allowed him to dedicate a substantial portion of his time to this important task. He also said, “To the Department of Science, Technology, and Innovation—thank you for your bold vision in investing in this work. A special tribute to the late Dr Daniel Adams, whose commitment and leadership during the early days of the South African Research Infrastructure Roadmap helped lay the foundation for all that SAPRIN has become.”

Dr Herbst also thanked his friend and co-director, Mark Collinson, “From the earliest days in 2015 when you invited me to join you as champion of a network of health and demographic sites as a national research infrastructure until now where both of us will pursue other interests, it has been an incredibly rewarding experience to share in your wisdom in forging this network.”

Professor Liesl Zülke, Vice President for Extramural Research and Internal Portfolio at the SAMRC thanked Kobus and Mark on behalf of the SAMRC’s Executive Management Committee for advancing population science in South Africa, at a national level. Their leadership and dedication in creating a solid foundation for SAPRIN bodes well as the unit embarks on its next phase of implementation.”

Professor Zülke said, “It has been my absolute pleasure working with Kobus and Mark, being inspired by their scientific knowledge, passion and commitment to demographic sciences and SAPRIN on each occasion. I wish them the very best as they take on new scientific endeavours.”