

Obituary

Thomas Micheal Guntram Ignaz Rehle (1951 - 2025)



*'So let us remember him with gratitude –
for he truly enriched all our lives and
accomplished so much good, not only in the
field of medical research'*
(words from a dear friend from school days)

It was with profound sadness that we learned of the passing of Prof. Thomas Rehle on 16 November 2025. His contributions to science, public health and humanity, in South Africa (SA) and globally, were extraordinary, and this tribute can reflect only a portion of his remarkable legacy.

Prof. Rehle held an MD from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, an MSc from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and a PhD in Medical Sciences from the University of Antwerp. From 1987 to 1993, he directed the German Support Programme on AIDS for developing countries, implemented by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ). During his tenure with Family Health International (1996 - 2001), he was responsible for the design and implementation of the overall evaluation strategy of two global AIDS control and prevention projects (AIDSCAP and IMPACT). He pioneered the development of innovative evaluation tools and data collection methods that became part of technical Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)/World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines for second-generation HIV surveillance, and monitoring and evaluation, of national HIV/AIDS prevention and care programmes.

He joined the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Cape Town, SA, in May 2005. Thereafter, for more than two decades, Prof. Rehle made invaluable scientific contributions that shaped SA's public health landscape, work that continued well beyond his retirement and departure from the country.

Working alongside Profs Olive Shisana and Leickness Simbayi, and researchers from the South African Medical Research Council and the Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation, he supported national household population-level HIV surveillance in SA, co-leading and collaborating to establish a true public health approach to understanding HIV and AIDS at a time when HIV denialism was prevalent, and the epidemic poorly understood and shrouded in secrecy and misinformation. This surveillance, conducted under the HSRC's SA HIV Serostatus and Media (SABSSM) survey series and benchmarked to international standards, became a model for other countries in the region as they faced their own epidemics, and sought evidence for rational policy decisions. From the SABSSM survey series, he contributed evidence for HIV treatment advocacy and led innovative work on HIV incidence estimation. Prof. Rehle was also instrumental in establishing sector-specific HIV surveillance, co-leading HIV surveys among SA's educators and key population groups, such as men who have sex with men. His expertise in infectious disease epidemiology also supported the HSRC and its partners in conducting SA's national COVID-19 seroprevalence survey from 2020 to 2021. Through his public health and epidemiological expertise, he was part of SA's first household-based survey on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and nutrition in 2012, a survey that provided previously unavailable insights into SA's NCD profile.

Prof. Rehle was distinguished by the depth of his scientific rigour and the breadth of his contributions. He had an exceptional ability to interrogate complex data and translate research findings into meaningful insights for both the scientific community and policy-makers. He was uncompromising in his commitment to methodological excellence and analytical precision. He held an unwavering belief that the data must be allowed to speak for themselves. This principled approach underpinned his policy and research recommendations.

As a visiting professor in the University of Cape Town (UCT) School of Public Health, Prof. Rehle was a regular contributor to and instigator of epidemiological discussions with his UCT colleagues, related to the evolving HIV epidemic. Generations of Master's in Public Health students were privileged to be taught HIV surveillance by Prof. Rehle, who brought to the classroom the gravitas, insights and passion of a pioneer in the field.

Through his research, teaching, mentorship and approach to life, Prof. Rehle shaped and inspired many scientists and public health professionals in SA and globally, and many continue to carry forward his principles, integrity and commitment to evidence-based public health.

Beyond his professional achievements, Prof. Rehle will be remembered for his humanity. He had the ability to connect with people from all walks of life with empathy. Frank in his views, fearless in debate and endowed with a sharp and often unexpected sense of humour, he brought authenticity to every space he occupied. He loved his family, his community and humanity at large, and he embraced life fully beyond work through his passions, including his love of chess.

Prof. Thomas Rehle is deeply missed by his colleagues at the HSRC and at UCT, and by the broader scientific community. His legacy will endure in the data that changed policy, in the lives he mentored and in the healthier societies that his work helped to build. His legacy will remain in our hearts.

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