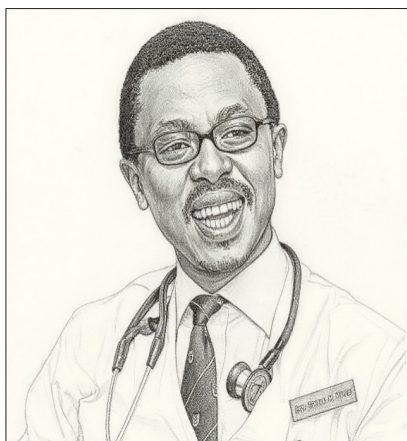


# The 6th UCT Bongani Mayosi Memorial Lecture: Fostering evidence-based humanity in the academy and beyond: Lessons from the legacy of Prof. Bongani Mayosi



Prof. Bongani Mayosi (1967 - 2018) was a world-renowned cardiologist and Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town (UCT). He was an exemplary leader known for his groundbreaking research in prevention and treatment of poverty-related heart diseases, especially rheumatic fever and tuberculous pericarditis, and his passion in mentorship of young black researchers, striving to change the face of academia in South Africa (SA) and beyond. One of a handful of members from Africa of the National Academy of Medicine of the USA, he also received the Order of Mapungubwe, SA's highest honour, for his contributions to medicine.

Following his untimely death in 2018, UCT, in partnership with the Bongani Mayosi Foundation, established the annual UCT Bongani Mayosi Memorial Lecture to serve as a platform to honour the enduring legacy of Prof. Bongani Mayosi. Its primary purpose is to foster critical dialogue on health equity, scientific innovation and the transformation of the medical profession – values that were central to Prof. Mayosi's life and work.

Prof. Mayosi's accomplishments in academic medicine have been celebrated through various lectures,<sup>[1]</sup> a biographical textbook,<sup>[2]</sup> a special edition of the *South African Medical Journal*<sup>[3]</sup> and many tributes published in various scientific journals.

This article is an essay based on the 6th UCT Bongani Mayosi Memorial Lecture that I delivered on 23 January 2026 at UCT in Cape Town, SA (you can watch the lecture

recording [here](#) and read the full [article](#) on *UCT News*). It uses his legacy as a lens through which to explore how we might rehumanise the academy. Drawing on both personal experience and empirical evidence, it distills seven guiding principles – live with intention, volunteer, be humble, be a friend, be kind, collaborate, and share and mentor – for fostering evidence-based humanity in academic and healthcare institutions.

## The humanity problem in the academy

Humanity can be understood biologically (the human species), philosophically (the state of being human) and ethically (the virtues that distinguish our better nature – kindness, empathy, altruism, compassion). In practice, humanity is expressed in how we talk, listen, include, support and make choices that affect others.

The academy is facing a humanity crisis. Across countries and disciplines, incivility – bullying, disrespect, exclusion, harassment and subtle everyday rudeness – has become a pervasive feature of academic and healthcare environments. This is not merely a matter of etiquette; workplace incivility is now recognised as a serious organisational and public health problem, with cascading 'incivility spirals' that erode wellbeing, performance and culture.<sup>[4,5]</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified existing fractures: geopolitical polarisation, social inequality, individualism and the amplifying effects of digital communication have all contributed to a decline in civility and trust.<sup>[6,7]</sup> Academic medicine and higher education are not immune – indeed, recent work documents high levels of harassment, cyber-incivility and hostile climates in academic medicine, with clear links to mental health.<sup>[5]</sup>

Workplace incivility has been defined as low-intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm, violating norms of mutual respect.<sup>[4]</sup> It includes behaviours such as ignoring colleagues, dismissive comments, subtle exclusion and public belittling. Though seemingly minor, these behaviours accumulate and can spiral into more severe aggression, undermining psychological safety, performance and organisational trust.<sup>[4]</sup>

In academic medicine, large-scale surveys show that harassment and cyber-incivility are common, with disproportionate impact on women, faculty of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals, and are associated with worse mental health outcomes.<sup>[5]</sup> In higher education more broadly, incivility contributes to burnout, attrition and toxic climates that compromise teaching, research and service.<sup>[8]</sup> Table 1 provides some examples of stories of and research on academic incivility in different countries.

These patterns mirror broader societal trends: polarisation, social inequality and the dehumanising potential of online discourse. The academy cannot isolate itself from these forces – but it can choose how to respond. The question is not only whether we can address the humanity crisis, but whether we will.

In this context, the life and legacy of Prof. Bongani Mayosi offer a powerful, deeply human counter-example. A world-class scientist based in the Global South, Bongani combined scientific rigour with humility, kindness, mentorship and a profound commitment to community. His actions embodied the African humanist philosophy of *ubuntu/botho* – 'I am because you are' – which emphasises interconnectedness, compassion and shared responsibility.<sup>[9,10]</sup>

## Bongani Mayosi's legacy as a framework for rehumanising the academy

Bongani's legacy is not only his scientific output – major clinical trials such as the investigation of the management of pericarditis (IMPI) trial,<sup>[11,12]</sup> global policy influence and extensive grant funding – but the way he lived and worked: with intention, service, humility, friendship, kindness, collaboration and mentorship. These are not abstract traits; they are choices, and can serve as a direct call for implementation, as actionable imperatives, or simply to catalyse immediate practical application.

Below, each lesson is paired with empirical scientific evidence that supports its value and benefit for individuals and institutions.

### Lesson 1: Live with intention

Bongani's life was marked by purposeful action – from designing the IMPI trial to

**Table 1. Some examples of news articles and research publications about academic ‘incivility’ in different countries**

Country	Publication
Canada	Bosetti L. Incivility is the new bullying in higher education. University Affairs, 20 September 2021.
Sierra Leone	Jalloh F, et al. A qualitative study of academic bullying among junior doctors in Sierra Leone. BMC Public Health 2025;25(1):3107. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-24423-3">https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-24423-3</a> Jalloh F, et al. Prevalence and determinants of academic bullying among junior doctors in Sierra Leone: Cross-sectional study. JMIRx Med 2025;6:e68865. <a href="https://doi.org/10.2196/68865">https://doi.org/10.2196/68865</a>
South Africa	Olabiya OJ, du Plessis M, van Vuuren CJ. Unveiling the toxic leadership culture in South African universities: Authoritarian behaviour, cronyism and self-serving practices. Front Educ 2024;9:1446935. <a href="https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.1446935">https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.1446935</a> Letsebe K. Attempt to murder vice-chancellor shocks South Africa. Research Professional News, 12 January 2023. Letsebe K. Campus violence and threats ‘have reached crisis point’. Research Professional News, 2 February 2023 Psychreg News Team. Academic jealousy threatens the future of South African universities. Psychreg, 22 January 2025.
Sweden	Björklund C, Jensen I. A darkside of academia: A study of bullying, its prevalence, causes and perpetrators in an academic setting. Front Educ 2025;10:1528899. <a href="https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2025.1528899">https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2025.1528899</a>
UK	Ross J. Bullying up: Academic ‘incivility’ exerts heavy toll on deans. Times Higher Education, 2021. Tight M. Bullying in higher education: An endemic problem? Tertiary Educ Manage 2023;29:123-137.
Australia	Heffman T, Bosetti L. Why universities must act on the rise of a new kind of bullying: incivility. The Conversation, 17 June 2021. Australian Human Rights Commission. Media Release. Commission delivers interim report on racism at Australian universities. AHRC, 19 December 2024. Universities Australia. Media Release. Universities Australia condemns all forms of coercion on campus and in the classroom. Universities Australia, 30 June 2021.
USA	Becker BK. Confronting nontraditional bullies in academe: Two types of bullies in academe that can go unrecognized. Opinion. Inside Higher Education, 19 January 2023. Holdcroft B. Student incivility, intimidation, and entitlement in academia. Academe Magazine 2014;100(3). Migliaccio T, et al. Bullying within academia: A cultural and structural analysis. Learn Cult Soc Interact 2024;44. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2023.100783">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2023.100783</a>

improve outcomes for patients with tuberculous pericarditis, to the seemingly simple choice of doing the family grocery shopping as an expression of responsibility and care. His actions were rarely random; they were aligned with clear goals and values.

Psychological research on purpose and intentional living shows that having a sense of meaning and direction is associated with better mental health, greater engagement and more sustained effort towards long-term goals.<sup>[13-15]</sup> Individuals who live with intention tend to dream more, learn more, share more, care more, participate more, do more and become more – exactly the pattern observed in Bongani’s life and in those he inspired.

Choosing to live with intention in the academy means aligning our daily behaviours and actions – teaching, supervision, leadership, collegial interactions – with a conscious commitment to humanity and service, rather than drifting with the currents of competition and ego.

**Lesson 2: Volunteer in your community**

Bongani quietly gave enormous amounts of time and expertise: reviewing for dozens of journals, serving on editorial boards, and contributing to the World Health Organization, South African Medical Research Council, Lancet Commissions and professional societies. This was not transactional; it was an expression of civic and scientific responsibility.

An umbrella review of systematic reviews on volunteering shows that volunteering is associated with improved social, mental and physical health, including greater wellbeing, reduced depression and enhanced life satisfaction.<sup>[16]</sup> Longitudinal studies in older adults suggest that volunteering is linked to better health and even lower mortality risk, particularly when motivated by other-oriented reasons.<sup>[17]</sup>

In academic contexts, volunteering – whether through peer review, committee work, community engagement, or *pro bono* teaching – can therefore be seen not only as service to others but as a health-promoting behaviour for the volunteer. It reinforces a sense of

belonging and shared purpose, countering the isolation and cynicism that often fuel incivility.

**Lesson 3: Be humble**

Bongani left us with a legacy that combines brilliance with grace. He was committed to rigorous enquiry guided by humility. He was one of the top and most accomplished scientists in the world – with over 350 peer-reviewed publications, over 100 national and international conferences, over 14 awards and honours, and more than ZAR100 million rands in grant funding. Despite being among the top 2% of scientists globally (according to Stanford University/Elsevier Top 2% Scientists), Bongani remained deeply humble and humane, a testament to the idea that true greatness lies in service and not prestige. He listened more than he spoke, credited others generously and treated students, colleagues and staff with equal respect. His humility made collaboration easier, feedback safer and learning continuous.

Organisational research suggests that leader humility – characterised by accurate self-awareness, appreciation of others’ strength, and openness to learning – is associated with stronger relationships, better team functioning and greater innovation.<sup>[18]</sup> Furthermore, a systematic review and meta-analysis of several studies shows moderate association between humility and important health outcomes and wellbeing.<sup>[19]</sup> Humility can also buffer against the ‘success arrogance’ that can erode empathy and increase incivility.

The Chinese proverb ‘Be like the bamboo. The higher you grow, the deeper you bow’ captures a crucial corrective for the academy: as our achievements grow, our humility should deepen. This is especially important in hierarchical environments where power differentials can easily be abused.

**Lesson 4: Be a friend**

Bongani’s friendships were not incidental; they were central to his way of being. He worked hard, but he also made space for joy, hospitality

and genuine connection. People remember not only what he did, but how he made them feel – valued, seen, heard, included and supported.

A landmark meta-analysis of social relationships and mortality found that strong social connections are associated with a significantly reduced risk of death, comparable with or exceeding many traditional risk factors.<sup>[20]</sup> Social support is also linked to better mental health, resilience and recovery from illness.<sup>[21]</sup>

In academic life, friendship can be a protective factor against burnout, isolation and the corrosive effects of incivility. Choosing to be a friend – to check in, to celebrate others' successes, to stand with them in difficulty – is a concrete way to practise humanity.

### Lesson 5: Be kind

Bongani embodied *ubuntu/botho*: 'You are a person because of other people.' This philosophy emphasises that our identity and flourishing are inseparable from the wellbeing of others. It reminds us of our collective fate and inherent oneness – where every individual journey is part of a single shared human story – and that our existence is fundamentally communal, finding its true purpose and fulfilment only when we intentionally practise kindness and share what we have with others. Bongani always embraced kindness. For him, kindness was not an occasional act but a way of life. His life and tragic passing have served as a catalyst for a deeper conversation about the importance of solidarity in the academy, encouraging us to be more morally attentive to one another.

Randomised controlled trials of kindness interventions show that performing kind acts for others can improve wellbeing, reduce stress and enhance positive affect, including among adolescents and individuals at risk for mental illness.<sup>[22-24]</sup> Kindness also fosters social connection and reduces loneliness, which are themselves critical determinants of health.<sup>[23,25]</sup>

Hope theory further suggests that hope – often sparked by the kindness of others – contributes to subjective, psychological and social wellbeing, and motivates constructive action.<sup>[26]</sup> Bongani's kindness gave others hope and courage to pursue ambitious goals, especially in resource-constrained settings.

In environments where competition and scarcity can breed harshness, choosing kindness is both transformational and evidence based.

### Lesson 6: Collaborate and share

Bongani's scientific life was defined by collaboration. The IMPI network, and many others he helped build, spanned countries and disciplines. He insisted on fair credit, opportunities for emerging leaders and transparent documentation (such as the IMPI CV; Table 2) to ensure that contributions were visible and shared. Updating the IMPI CV was a standing agenda item for all IMPI Trial Steering Committee meetings, and sharing credit was a fundamental guiding principle for the IMPI collaboration.

Bibliometric and network analyses consistently show that collaboration networks are associated with higher productivity, greater impact and more resilient research ecosystems.<sup>[27-31]</sup> Strong, diverse networks facilitate knowledge exchange, innovation and the translation of research into policy and practice.<sup>[28,31]</sup>

Collaboration is also a social antidote to the individualism that fuels entitlement and incivility. When sharing – data, credit, opportunities – is a guiding principle, the academy becomes a more just and generative space.

### Lesson 7: Mentor others

Mentorship was one of Bongani's most powerful legacies. He mentored formally and informally, offering guidance, advocacy and

honest feedback. He possessed the classic attributes of an effective mentor: experience, integrity, patience, humility and unselfishness.

A growing body of literature in academic medicine shows that effective mentorship is associated with greater career satisfaction, higher research productivity (more grants and publications), faster promotion and better retention.<sup>[32-37]</sup> Mentorship benefits mentors as well, enhancing their sense of purpose and engagement.<sup>[32,35,36,38]</sup>

To choose to mentor is to choose to invest in the future. It is also a direct challenge to exclusionary practices that reproduce or perpetuate inequity in the academy. As Trevor Noah says, 'being chosen is one of the greatest gifts we can offer another human being.'<sup>[39]</sup> This Bongani understood quite well. His passion for mentoring was not just about academic rigour but also about empowering students, particularly giving hope and a sense of belonging to black students in the health sciences.

## Institutional responsibility and the case for compassion

Individual choices matter, but they must be supported by institutional structures and cultures. Some institutions have begun to place humanity and compassion at the centre of their strategic plans, recognising that the safety and wellbeing of staff, learners and patients are foundational, not optional.

The emerging field of 'compassionomics' synthesises evidence that compassion in healthcare is associated with better clinical outcomes, improved adherence, reduced costs and lower burnout among clinicians.<sup>[40]</sup> Compassion is not merely a moral ideal; it is a measurable, impactful component of high-quality care.<sup>[40]</sup>

For the academy, this suggests that embedding compassion and humanity into policies, leadership behaviours, promotion criteria and learning environments is both ethically and empirically justified. The idea of a Bongani Mayosi Research Hub – focused on diseases of poverty, mentorship, collaboration, compassion and social responsiveness – illustrates how an institution such as UCT could operationalise his legacy as a 'humanity revival' in African higher education.

Such a hub would require sustained endowment, global and pan-African partnerships and deliberate cultural work. But its core tenets – *ubuntu*, equity, mentorship, collaboration and compassion – are precisely the pillars needed to build a culture of caring and compassion in the academy and beyond.

## Some concluding remarks

The humanity crisis in the academy is real and well documented. Incivility, harassment and exclusion harm individuals, corrode institutions and undermine the public mission of education and healthcare. Yet the life of Prof. Bongani Mayosi demonstrates that another way is possible. My beloved friend and former Dean of the Medical School at Stellenbosch University, Prof. Jimmy Volmink, reminded me that 'Bongani stood out as a beacon of light in the midst of a climate of self-interest, greed, quest for personal recognition, prestige and power, polarisation and a lack of solidarity.'

Bongani's legacy is a profound testament to a life lived with steady integrity, exceptional kindness, scientific excellence and unwavering compassion, reminding us to embrace generosity, intention, mentorship and humility in how we live our own lives in service to others. His dedication to public service and his commitment to uplifting future generations of scientists and leaders, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, has left an indelible mark, and continues to inspire through the Bongani Mayosi Foundation, the UCT Bongani Mayosi Memorial Lecture and the countless individuals whose lives he touched.

**Table 2. The IMPI trial CV: A template for a study CV**

Focus	Paper	Lead author	Co-authors	Acknowledgements	Journal and target date	Status
Rationale and design	Study methodology	BM	Co-investigators	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	<i>American Heart Journal</i> , 2013	COMPLETE
Main results 1	Prednisolone arm	BM	Co-investigators	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	<i>New England Journal of Medicine</i> , August 2014	SUBMITTED
Main results 2	Mw arm	SP/MN (joint)	Co-investigators	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	<i>New England Journal of Medicine</i> , August 2014	SUBMITTED
Challenges	IMPI challenges: Sharing experiences and solutions	BM/MN/SP/ VF/JB/LT	Co-investigators	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, Aug 2018	IN PROGRESS
Echo	Echocardiographic changes: Natural history and impact of adjunctive steroids	SP	Co-investigators	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, September 20XX	TBD
ECG	ECG changes with interventions	CC/SP	Co-investigators	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, September 20XX	TBD
Alternative diagnoses	Non-TB pericarditis and dual pathology (including data from the screening logs)	ZK/SP plus JS	Co-investigators	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, October 20XX	TBD
Microbiology	Drug-resistant TB	SP/BM2		DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, October 20XX	TBD
Process	Adjudication process	SP		DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, November 20XX	TBD
Syndromes of pericardial disease	Pericardial haemodynamics	SP		DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, December 20XX	TBD
Statistics	Competing risk analysis and centre-based differences	FG/LT	BM/MN	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, November 20XX	TBD
Data synthesis	Updated meta-analysis	SP/CW/ LT	BM/MN	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, December 20XX	TBD
Infectious disease outcomes	Impact of HIV infection on clinical characteristics and outcome	JS/MS/GM	BM/MN	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, December 20XX	TBD
Pharmacokinetics	Prednisolone versus Placebo	JS/HM/TG	BM/MN	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, December 20XX	TBD
Immunogenicity	Mw	MC/TS/WH	BM/MN	DSMB, Adjudication Committee	?, December 20XX	TBD

By distilling his legacy into seven guiding actionable principles – live with intention, volunteer, be humble, be a friend, be kind, collaborate and share, and mentor – we gain not only an ethical framework but an evidence-based roadmap. Each of these actions is supported by empirical research showing benefits for wellbeing, productivity, equity and organisational health.

The challenge now is to move from admiration to imitation – from tribute to transformation. Individually, we can choose to embody these attributes in our daily work. Collectively, institutions can embed humanity and compassion into their structures and strategies. Fig. 1 depicts the nature of the crisis, its far-reaching impact and the potential of the Mayosi framework to guide transformative change at both individual and institutional levels to restore humanity within the academy.

The former US first lady, Michelle Obama, once said ‘We’ve got a responsibility to live up to the legacy of those who came before us

by doing all that we can to help those who come after us.’ Adapting her words: we have a responsibility to live up to Bongani’s legacy by doing all that we can to help those who come after us. The work of rehumanising the academy is long and difficult – but it is also deeply hopeful. Every intentional act of kindness, mentorship, collaboration and courage bends the culture a little closer to the world Bongani imagined and worked for.

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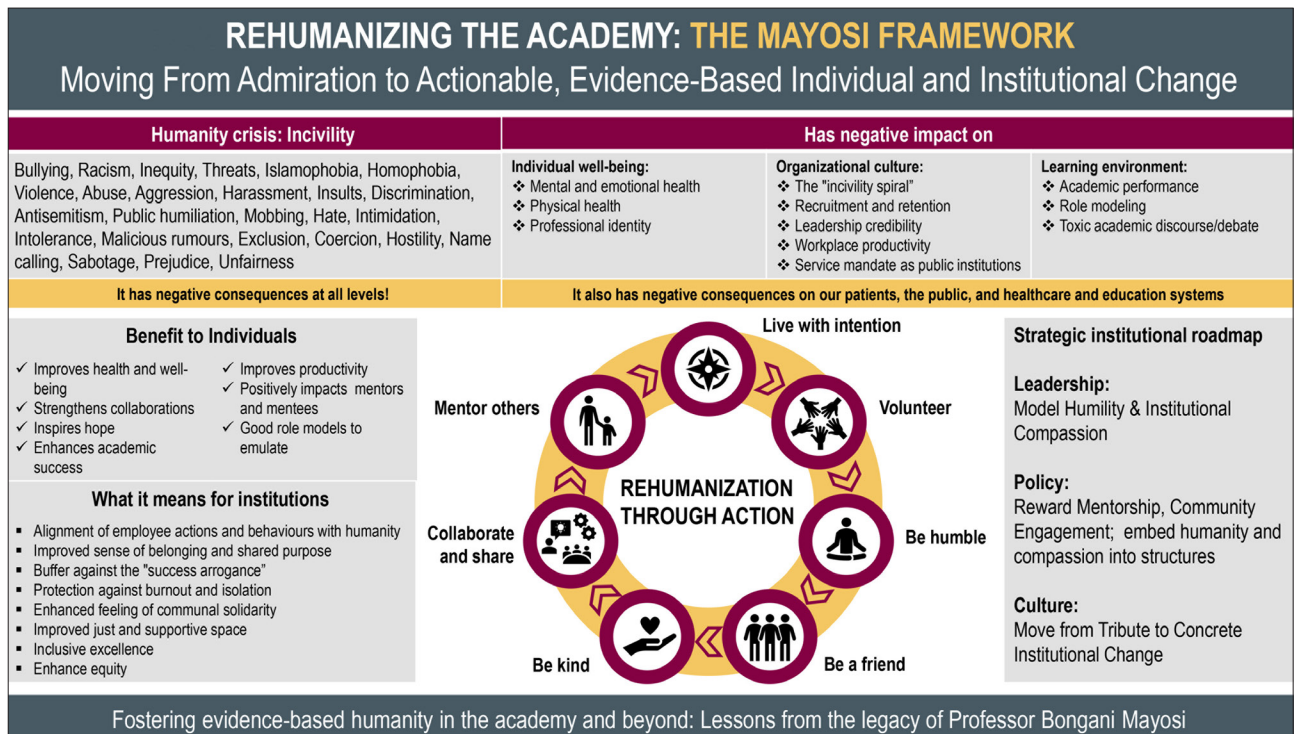


Fig. 1. Rehumanising the academy: The Mayosi framework.

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