Dr Brian Brink was the group medical consultant at Anglo American where, together with Mr Bobby Godsell, he played a strategic role in introducing free anti-retroviral therapy (ART) to the company’s employees.

Dr Brink believed passionately in the value of ART in treating HIV and the moral necessity for providing it to the workforce. He spent years fighting executive hesitancy and uncertainty within the company. Anglo American’s public expression of commitment to an ART programme on August 2002 was a major victory for his persistence, courage and unwavering commitment.

At the time Anglo American employed about 68 000 people in South Africa, two-thirds of those on its platinum mines. The company’s leadership pressed Dr Brink for precise numbers on what an ART programme would cost the company. He consistently argued that there were too many unknown variables to make precise calculations. But he also argued strongly that providing ART would ultimately cost less than not doing so. He believed that it was critical for business to take the lead – although government was resisting – and was strongly criticised by the then Minister of Health for adopting that stance.

Despite the frustrations he felt Dr Brink kept up his internal lobbying activities until the August 2002 commitment. One of his former colleagues described his role as such, “Brian was the champion. He motivated and turned around a sceptical group. Without his efforts, it would not have happened”.

In 2002, Anglo American estimated that approximately 23% of its employees in southern Africa were living with HIV, and that in any one year 10% to 15% of them might need ART. The Group companies contracted with AngloGold’s Aurum Institute for Health Research to manage the implementation of ART through company-owned and -operated health-care facilities. By the end of 2002 11 company sites had been registered for the delivery of ART by Aurum and approximately 100 employees were receiving treatment.

Primarily due to the efforts of Dr Brink, two of the country’s largest companies, Anglo American and AngloGold initiated programmes that saved many thousands of lives, brought credit on the companies, and most importantly, set an example for the state health service to follow once the resistance of government leadership to ART had been overcome. Indeed, the vision and leadership of Brian Brink almost certainly played a central part in breaking down that resistance.

The work of Dr Brink has also resonated internationally, where large-scale ART provision through the workplace is now well established. Without his break-through leadership this achievement may have been significantly delayed.

Dr Brink advises the Nelson Mandela Foundation on the strategic response to HIV/AIDS in South Africa, and currently serves as alternate board member for the Private Sector delegation on the Board of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria. Dr Brink is involved in various national initiatives to enhance the role of the private sector in broadening access to sustainable, quality healthcare for all the citizens of South Africa. He is a director of Discovery Health, the largest health insurer in South Africa, a board member of Section27 (formerly the AIDS Law Project), and the current chair of the International Women’s Health Coalition, which provides excellent technical advice on the most appropriate interventions in support of women and girls in developing countries.
Dr Brink, a Wits graduate, deserves his alma mater’s recognition for his far-sighted and courageous persistence in leading the way in a matter of great humane and political importance. Wits is proud to honour its graduate for his leadership in this vital field of social change by awarding Dr Brink with an honorary doctorate.