The professor who wouldn't look away: Leslie London on poison, the 'dop system', and genocide

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A fighter for human rights in the tumultuous years before South Africa's first democratic elections, Leslie London qualified as a medical doctor in the 1980s.

He recalls delivering monthly hypertension and diabetes services to rural canning factory workers in a church hall in Robertson, in the Western Cape, after government officials prohibited him from using the local state-run clinic. These services were seen as a "threat to the state", he says, for acknowledging workers' rights to basic healthcare, and for highlighting the social causes of their illnesses.

In 1994, London completed his doctoral thesis examining long-term exposure to agrichemicals among 247 fruit farm workers in the Kouebokkeveld, a mountainous part of the Great Karoo in the Western Cape.

"Many years ago, my PhD research was about the harmful effects of pesticides for farm workers", he says. "In particular, I was researching the subtle effects of exposure to these pesticides on brain function... These pesticides are neurotoxins so they affect your cognition, your memory, personality, your psycho-motor function..."

More than three decades later, in December 2025, as he stepped down as Head of the Division of Public Health Medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT), colleagues packed a lecture hall to celebrate his legacy fighting health inequity.

His way

At his farewell event, London could be seen in a signature bright patterned shirt, similar to the one he's wearing for our interview. His renowned shirts are from "a small shop in Observatory", he tells *Spotlight*, referring to the suburb near UCT's medical campus. This is also where he lives with his wife Phyllis Orner, a researcher in women's health.

In a surprise twist at London's farewell, his administrator Dominique Adams took to the podium, singing a heart-tugging rendition of Frank Sinatra's *My Way*, which she tailored for the occasion to "His Way".

Health Justice Initiative Director, Fatima Hassan, took to the podium, too. "The Leslie we know in civil society is not a professor, he's not a doctor. He is an activist first. Leslie is the most straightforward person; he calls it how he sees it. And he is the funniest person you will ever meet", she said.

Central to London's advocacy affiliations is the People's Health Movement, the global academic and activist health rights group, with him having co-founded the People's Health Movement South Africa (PHM-SA) in 2003. "[The PHM-SA] has been a consistent vehicle for articulating community voice in health policy in South Africa", he says. And his work continues.

Prof. Emeritus Leslie London
Photograph: Biénne Huisman/Spotlight

"Rotten", "dinosaur" pesticide regulation

London remains impassioned about pesticide regulation. Speaking to *Spotlight*, he cites the six children in Naledi, Soweto, who died after consuming food contaminated by the highly toxic pesticide terbufos in October 2024. At the time, despite being restricted for agricultural use, terbufos was circulated informally as a cheap and powerful rat poison.

"Refuse removal has collapsed in many of our townships and people are desperate", says London. "And the most powerful thing you can get is really toxic pesticides. It kills rats but it also kills people, it kills kids. The whole regulatory system is so rotten that for years you could just walk into a co-op and buy these grade-one toxic red label pesticides", he says.

The tragedy prompted a national outcry, drawing attention to the longstanding need for regulatory intervention around highly toxic compounds in South Africa. "The Act that actually covers pesticides in South Africa is from 1947, it predates apartheid", says London. "It's a dinosaur and it's never been repealed."

Towards reform?

In the wake of the Soweto incident, Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, appointed a Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on foodborne illness in December 2024, with London as Chairperson. In March 2025, the committee recommended that terbufos be banned for use immediately.

Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen, initially expressed concerns that an immediate ban could cause crop failures and food insecurity. He eventually shifted his stance to prioritise human safety, following pressure from various quarters. The ban was initiated and officially published in the Government Gazette in January 2026.

London elaborates on the process:
"There's an invitation for comments within 45 days, which means until the end of February. So [the Minister of Agriculture] intends to ban it by the end of February. However, that does not mean [the Minister] will ban it by the end of February. We will see how much influence powerful people have."

[Editor's note: Subsequent to this interview, the South African Government officially banned the acquisition, disposal, sale, or use of agricultural remedies containing terbufos as an active ingredient, with effect from 8 May 2026.]

Historically, powerful pesticide lobbies have exerted undue influence, which may have stalled decisive action, says London. "Agricultural authorities have totally been in the pockets of industry", he claims. Going forward, he says: "People will have to get used to the idea that the regulated can't decide how they're going to be regulated." Meanwhile, meetings of the MAC on foodborne illness continue.

The 'dop system' still needs reckoning

Another defining passion for London is alcohol abuse amongst vulnerable people, once again particularly farm workers. Large swathes of his academic output circled around dismantling the 'dop system' formerly prevalent in South Africa's wine and other farming districts. This practice saw farmers pay workers with alcohol rations instead of cash, contributing to generational alcohol dependency and public health crises like foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

In 1997, London co-founded the advocacy organisation DOPSTOP – a partnership between UCT and local health services and activists. "We pushed to frame the problem of alcohol abuse as a systemic problem that needs a systemic solution, not a problem of a drunk worker or a drunk mother", he says.

The original tip-off came from Stellenbosch. "A nurse on one of the mobile clinics saw farm workers queuing for alcohol given to them in small containers. She went to ask what's going on, but the farm manager denied it, so she came to UCT and we decided to start this project. It was tough. I mean, you can't get access to farm workers because they're on private property."

While earlier laws like the 1961 Liquor Act restricted the dop system, London explains that loopholes remained and the practice persisted. DOPSTOP's research and advocacy contributed to the Liquor Act of 1998, which prohibited any payment in alcohol or its provision as a work benefit.

Making clear that more work lies ahead, London notes that South Africa has the highest incidence of FAS in the world. "The dop system is the one huge structural injustice in South Africa that still needs a reckoning", he says.

"I mean, it persists in other ways. So, if you're alcohol dependent, a farmer might sell you alcohol on credit. And you know, some farmers have tried to stop it. They actually run their farms like a business. It's not in their interest to have drunk workers. But a lot of farms, they put up with drunk workers because the work is not that highly skilled."

Justice and the law

Even closer to home, as former Chairperson of the Observatory Civic Association (OCA), London became a face of the legal battle to stop multinational retail company Amazon from building its African headquarters beside the Liesbeek River which runs through some of Cape Town's oldest suburbs, and once provided a reliable water supply to the Khoi and San peoples and early colonialists.

In 2021, the OCA and the Goringhaicona Khoi Khoin Indigenous Traditional Council filed an urgent court interdict to halt the R4.6 billion construction, citing the land's cultural significance and environmental concerns. In turn, the developers, the City of Cape Town, and the Western Cape Government, filed an appeal, arguing that the project would provide thousands of jobs. A legal showdown of David and Goliath proportions ensued, with London saying they were ultimately forced to withdraw due to a lack of funds.

"We had very good lawyers", he says. "But we couldn't really pay them even though we managed to raise like R2 million. In the scale of things that's peanuts, compared to the resources the developers had access to."

During our interview at The Wild Fig in Observatory, a few hundred metres from the new Amazon precinct, London says he refuses to frequent the Riverlands Mall, next to the American multinational technology company's offices. Raising his shoulders, he laughs and shrugs: "Honestly, we don't need another shopping mall."

What did he take from the experience? "The thing that struck me was that justice and the law are separate concepts. You know, sometimes they coincide. Sometimes they don't", he says.

Growing up in Cape Town's southern suburbs, he says his first brush with injustice came at thirteen at a place meant for milkshakes and burgers.

"I used to play chess at school, the chess club was called the Claremont Chess Club. And I remember going to a tournament and going to Wimpy afterwards with one of the other players who was coloured, and he couldn't sit inside. So we sat outside on the sidewalk eating our hamburgers. And I mean, that stayed with me."

In his farewell talk at UCT, London framed his own success as part of a system of historical privilege.

The precautionary principle to prevent genocide

London attended Herzlia High School in Vredehoek, where he remains an active alumnus. In 2018, he co-signed a letter with other alumni condemning the school's move to discipline two students who kneeled during the singing of the Israeli national anthem, in protest against Israel's occupation of Palestinian land.

"I've been outspoken about Israel's genocide, about holding it accountable", says London. "The problem is people turn a blind eye. They say, oh, it's complicated… You know, blah, blah. It's not complicated. It's very simple."

He hopes to give a lecture on the topic at the World Congress on Public Health in Cape Town in September. The conference's theme is *Health Without Borders: Equity, Inclusion, and Sustainability.*

London says the proposed talk would be "on the precautionary principle to prevent genocide". He explains: "The logic is that when you don't have absolute certainty about a risk, you err on the side of precaution. And I'm going to be arguing that we had evidence that this was going to be a genocide, long before the genocide happened."

The physician-scholar's words are rapid, and his gestures animated as he expands on more upcoming conference seminars and three ongoing health sector studies with international financial backing, which he is leading. While formally retired, academics bestowed with the title of 'Professor Emeritus' remain affiliated to their university and may continue research and supervising students.

As he shares his plans, one gets the sense that his legacy of fighting for justice may extend well into the future.

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