

Cristiane Da Mata: 'One of the biggest challenges in dental research is trying to prove that oral health is part of general health, and therefore equally important'

By Kate Quinlan



Brazilian Cristiane Da Mata was recently appointed Editor of the *Journal of the Irish Dental Association (JIDA)*. Cristiane qualified as a dentist from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte, Brazil in 2000 and moved to Cork, Ireland in 2006, where she decided to pursue an academic career. After undertaking the Irish Dental Council Statutory exams, Cristiane worked as a Senior House Officer in restorative and paediatric dentistry, completed a Master's in Public Health and a PhD on the use of Atraumatic Restorative Treatment (ART) in older patients. She is currently a Lecturer in Restorative Dentistry at Cork University Dental School and Hospital (CUDSH), teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students. Her research areas of interest include minimally invasive dentistry, ART, cariology, gerodontology, quality of life and dental public health.

Where did you grow up in Brazil?

I grew up in Belo Horizonte, a city in the south east of the country. It's the sixth largest city in Brazil with a population of around 3 million people. I came straight from Belo Horizonte to Cork, Ireland, 16 years ago.

Did you have good access to dental services growing up?

I did. I grew up in a middle class family. My parents always valued oral health, the importance of a beautiful smile and healthy teeth. Then when I was around eight or nine I was diagnosed with hypodontia, so I began visiting different dentists and started orthodontic treatment which lasted a good few years of my life. That's when I started getting more interested in dentistry. I thought: this is something that I could do. For many years I was going from one dentist to another and then I ended up in dental school aged 18.

Are there other dentists in your family?

No, I'm the first, and as far as I'm concerned I'm the last – so far. My father was a business administrator and my mother was a primary school teacher. I have a brother who is in IT and a sister who is a psychologist and they

are still in Brazil with their own families. I'm the only one that left the country. We usually visit once a year and my parents visit Ireland too. However, in the summer of 2019, we decided to travel in Europe instead of going to Brazil. Then COVID hit and we had to cancel our trip to Brazil and it ended up being a three-year gap; that was tough. We visited in 2021 and this year so things have got back to normal. My parents are due to visit Cork this week.

What led you to Ireland in 2006?

I was following my husband, who is an architect. He came to work here in 2006. He had previously worked here as an intern in 2002 for a year, then returned to Brazil, then they offered him an opportunity to return to Cork and work for them. We thought, let's give it a go, and stay there for a few years – and here we are, 16 years later with three Irish children! They speak Portuguese as well. The youngest one is only five, nearly six, but because there was the gap of COVID, not going to Brazil and not having family over, he struggled a little bit with the language, but he's back to normal now and speaks Portuguese fine as his second language.

What inspired your academic focus on restorative dentistry and public health?

I've always been very interested in improving the oral health of a group of people – communities, as opposed to individuals. So that's why working in practice, doing a filling for one person, and then another person, was never what I really saw myself doing. I did that for a few years in Brazil but when I moved to Ireland I already knew that I wanted to pursue an academic career.

ART is a very patient-friendly technique; you don't necessarily need a clinical setting to do it because there is no drilling involved. The research around ART started in Africa in the 1980s – in underserved communities. When I came to Ireland, Professor Finbarr Allen was interested in doing something along those lines for older patients – so you can see them as a sort of underserved population also – marginalised – even in developed countries like Ireland. So that's when I started doing my research around the area.

Do you enjoy being a lecturer and passing on your knowledge to students?

Yes. My mum said that from a very young age, my favourite game was pretending ▶▶

« to be a teacher; I was always a teacher. A very strict one! I don't think I'm that strict anymore... but that passion was always in me. So when I started in academia, doing research and teaching, I was actually delighted that I was able to use my degree as a dentist, but also do something that I was really passionate about: teaching. As part of my role as a lecturer, I supervise students in the clinic, there is didactic teaching such as lectures and tutorials, I do research and I see patients as well. I have to say that teaching students is my favourite part of it all, both in the clinic and in lectures.

We have around 60 students a year at CUDSH. I teach first, third and fifth year students the most – so I have contact with about 180 students.

What research are you currently involved with?

I'm currently working on a project in the area of gerodontology. I'm really interested in finding out about how oral health has an impact or can be related to the onset of frailty in the older patient, so I'm currently working on a grant application. I think it's very interesting the way that we know now that oral health and general health are interconnected, but one of the biggest challenges in dental research is trying to prove that oral health is part of general health, and therefore equally important. That's not recognised – we're usually trying to fight our case to get funds. You're competing against, for example, studies on diabetes, or on cancer, and oral health is at the bottom of the priority list. We have to put the mouth back in the body and show that it is equally as important.

How did it feel to be appointed the honorary editor of the *Journal of the Irish Dental Association* in January this year?

I was looking for a new challenge after having chaired the Dental School Athena Swan committee (an initiative for gender equality in academia) for more than two years. Then I heard the Irish Dental Association were looking for a new editor for *JIDA* and I went for the interview, and got the job. It was an honour to be appointed, especially being a woman, non-Irish, and as English is not my first language.

Every achievement in my career I celebrate because it is harder; I find it harder, as a woman, a parent, non-Irish etc.

Prior to me, Ciara Scott was editor for three years. I know that the role is a great responsibility and I am hoping to follow Ciara's great work.

Is the journal editorial team based within the Irish Dental Association?

Yes, it is, and the editorial board tend to be members of the IDA. If there is any academic that is interested and we welcome them onto the board, they become members of the IDA. We are interconnected. The meetings are all virtual at the moment, but we are hoping to have our first face-to-face meeting since the pandemic in January. Board members are all over the country so it's hard to get together for every meeting – but it will be good to meet everyone face to face in January and exchange ideas in person.

The *BDJ* is published 24 times a year in two volumes and is 150 years old this year. In 2021, there were 888 submissions of which 191 papers were accepted. Can you summarise *JIDA* for our readers?

The journal has been published for nearly 70 years. We only have two dental schools in Ireland, so having such a high-quality journal for that length of time is really fantastic. Of course we depend on submissions from researchers and they mainly come from Ireland, and also we

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have commissioned content such as clinical features and clinical tips. At the moment we publish every second month: six issues a year, and usually two peer-reviewed articles in each issue and a clinical feature and a clinical tip. Our readership is mainly general dental practitioners so it's trying to keep that balance between academic content, which can be heavy and only interesting to some of our readers, and bringing content that is very applicable to practice. So that's what I'm trying to achieve: peer-reviewed content from Ireland, and from international authors, and also content that can be more easily translated into practice.

Does anyone subscribe besides IDA members?

At the moment, *JIDA* goes to every dentist in Ireland, not just IDA members, printed and online. Members do receive an extra section of content, which we may look to expand in the future. Non-IDA members can also subscribe.

Do you have a hands-on role in relation to content planning, commissioning, editing and proofreading?

I'm 100% involved: discussions for new content, what we're going to bring, new editions, commissioning content – the board meets for discussions then we come up with ideas for content and series of articles. At the moment, we have a series of gerodontology – my area of interest but also very timely as people are living longer, keeping their teeth for longer and we still have a lot to do for the older patient in terms of access to treatment and prevention. The board is constantly coming up with ideas. I receive the articles submitted, I assign reviewers then I do the proofreading as well.

What is on *JIDA*'s agenda at the moment?

The article submission system has recently been moved to an electronic platform, which I think will be a huge improvement for all parties involved. We are hoping to have a more efficient publication process, and

attract more submissions. And next year, as part of the IDA centenary celebrations, we are planning to bring a diversity of contents related to the last 100 years of dentistry in Ireland.

What are the challenges of being editor of *JIDA* in 2022?

We're still living a post-COVID sort of life. Here in Ireland, I feel that a lot of research projects came to a halt during COVID and of course trying to do blended working... it got harder to get people to contribute. People are still learning to adapt to this new lifestyle post-COVID and trying to be productive and people are still trying to find the ideal >>>

« with a mixture of home and workplace working. The lack of face-to-face contact with the public has been detrimental to all of us. We had the first post-pandemic IDA face-to-face conference in November 2021 and it was fantastic to see people enjoying time together again. For me, there were people who I had been talking to online for so long that I finally saw in person for the first time and it changes that relationship for the better. For the journal, that's important because we depend on engagement from people, from GDPs, to find out what they want to see, what they like and dislike. COVID slowed that. The pandemic made everyone a little bit antisocial and now we are coming out again. The main challenge in terms of research is getting back on track.

How do you balance this new role with your other commitments?

Being an editor is a lot of work but it is very rewarding, and because I'm an academic, things are very interlinked. I'm constantly reviewing papers for other journals and supervising PhD students so I'm very used

to the world of research, reading articles and reviewing things. Even though it's added to my workload, I think it's a very nice and rewarding job.

Is the IDA planning anything special to mark 100 years since it was established?

2023 is the IDA's centenary and the Association is planning different things to mark the anniversary. The launch of a book about 100 years of the association, some podcasts, and a lot of the content in the Journal will be related to 100 years of the Association. We're currently discussing what sort of content we'd like to include. It's a very important landmark for any business/company, because such a lot happens in 100 years, and if you imagine dentistry in Ireland 100 years ago and now, a lot has changed.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

With three children, I usually do activities dedicated to them: taking them to parks, for pizza, lunch somewhere. I think when they're older I might return to hobbies: I

do like reading and painting. Painting is a hobby I stopped years ago when the kids arrived.

It's hard to find time for anything else when you're working and you have children.

How was your summer – did you go abroad?

We went to Brazil for Easter so that was our international holiday this year.

This summer, my family and I had a fantastic time in Ireland. It is not every year that we have such a hot summer, with so many days of sunshine. Cork is half an hour from the beach and from the forest, and my parents were visiting, so there were a lot of beach trips and barbecues. I feel recharged to face the autumn and winter months ahead. ■

For more information about the Journal of the Irish Dental Association visit <https://www.dentist.ie/journal/journal.5621.html>. For more information on submitting a manuscript to the Journal, visit <https://jida.scholasticahq.com/for-authors>.



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