

**SHORT COMMUNICATION**

# Political polarization at the time of the coronavirus: A Brazilian's view

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Initially, I would like to congratulate the Editors of Oral Diseases for the initiative of grouping together different realities of our colleagues around the world, in the face of what seems to be the biggest crisis, not only in health but also in economics, politics, and why not say of values, which certainly goes beyond our generation, for some with an extra component, that includes religion. Respecting the diversity of opinions, cultures, and realities of such a wide community, which involves readers and colleagues from all corners of the planet, I will try to stick to the issues that I considered most relevant, following the guidance of the Editors at the time of the invitation to elaborate this reflection.

Yes, the Oral Medicine community, in particular Oral Diseases readers, includes people from the whole world, but it seems we are close and perhaps be considered as family members. It is an excellent opportunity to get to know our “cousins” better.

In that sense, I apologize, at first, to anyone who thinks differently from me. In the end, I imagine what we all want is the end of the pandemic and that our lives, as soon as possible, resume normal, even though I am one of those who believe that the normal will be, by far, different from what was considered normal before the beginning of this crisis.

## 2 | MY LIFE IN TIMES OF CORONAVIRUS

### 2.1 | Professional life

Unlike most of the colleagues I know, I have a professional life divided between two formal jobs: I am a Professor at the Federal

University of Pernambuco (UFPE) since 1994 and military dentist of the Military Police of Pernambuco (PMPE) since the year of 1991.

At UFPE, I am involved in research and teaching undergraduate, Oral Medicine, and postgraduate courses *strictu e lato sensu*. Currently, I am the coordinator of the graduate program of the master's and doctorate courses in dentistry. Undergraduate and graduate classes at UFPE have been suspended since March 24, when the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Brazil appeared. In postgraduation, some non-classroom activities are maintained and, during this period, we had the qualification of thesis projects by videoconference. Some colleagues have been doing lives, in addition to online teaching activities, although scarce. We have been working from home, submitting scientific articles and research projects in public notices that have come up with themes related to the pandemic. Salaries to date are fully maintained.

As military dentist at PMPE, I hold the post of Colonel and am currently Director of the Dental Hospital of PMPE. The Military Health System has approximately 70 thousand users, including active and retired military personnel as well as their dependent relatives. Our staff is composed of 21 military dentists, 27 civil dentists, and 33 civil or military servants who work as dental assistants or in administrative activities. At the beginning of the pandemic, we paralyzed our clinics and started to see, following the recommendation of the health authorities, only urgent cases or unavoidable treatments. In each shift, a civilian and a military officer perform alternatively approximately 10 urgent calls, with the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE). Have to admit though, that at first we had difficulties, in particular with the acquisition of appropriate PFF2 or N95 masks. Also, even routine surgical masks almost disappeared from

the market, the prices have gone up 10- to 15-fold. Luckily, we had around 3000 surgical masks in stock. At present, we have three colleagues suspected of COVID-19 diagnosis and two confirmed cases.

## 2.2 | Personal life

Family life was transformed, I have a son who is also a dentist currently doing a master's degree in aesthetic dentistry at the University of São Paulo, and at the beginning of the epidemic, we decided that he should return to Recife to stay with us during the period of social isolation. A daughter in the last semester of business administration also at UFPE had undergraduate classes suspended, and her internship at multinational company allowed her to work in home office mode. Another daughter in the last year of secondary school also had the face-to-face classes suspended, but the school has maintained daily distance learning activities. My parents, aged 86 and 83, have been in complete social isolation for 6 weeks without contact with any of our relatives and are beginning to show signs of anxiety being on their own, making use only of live calls with myself, my brothers and sisters, and their children and grandchildren.

## 2.3 | Thoughts and fears

Since the confirmation of the first case of COVID-19 in Brazil, on March 26, the public statements of the President of the Republic, Mr. Jair Bolsonaro, have followed a growing trend. The spread of the virus was called by him "fantasy," "little cold," and "little flu," and there were many times when his attitudes were against the recommendations of his Minister of Health, Mr. Henrique Mandetta, for combating the pandemic, including avoiding gathering with supporters and shaking hands with the public. To make things worse, the Minister was fired by the President during this crisis. Also, last week Mr. Bolsonaro forced the resignation of his Minister of Justice, Mr. Sergio Moro, an internationally well-known person, considered by most the mentor and executor of the "car wash" operation, a political corruption investigation occurred recently in Brazil, which swept out many politicians from all spectrum of political parties culminating with the imprisonment of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The operation was compared and inspired in the Italian "clean hands" initiative. In this dismissal, the President acted under suspicious circumstances of trying to interfere in the Federal Police (the equivalent of FBI in the United States) for his own and inadequate benefit. Minister Moro came out raising suspicions of crimes committed by President Bolsonaro, who is now at risk of suffering impeachment.

The numbers of the pandemic in Brazil are alarming, although it is likely that it has not reached the peak yet. There have been 102,000 confirmed cases and 7,051 deaths recorded to date (<http://covid.saude.gov.br>). In Pernambuco, 8,643 cases were confirmed (42.2% male and 57.8% female), approximately 1/3 affecting health professionals

and 652 deaths (SEVS/CIEVS-PE. Data updated to 04/05/2020) ([https://12ad4c92-89c7-4218-9e11-0ee136fa4b92.filesusr.com/ugd/3293a8\\_bdcf56c27aeb402d94a4cd421999ead2.pdf](https://12ad4c92-89c7-4218-9e11-0ee136fa4b92.filesusr.com/ugd/3293a8_bdcf56c27aeb402d94a4cd421999ead2.pdf)).

Brazil is probably the first developing country with a continental dimension to face the crisis. While some think that the tropical climate may alleviate the transmission of the virus, although without any scientific evidence to support the idea, the number of people living below the line of poverty, living in slums, makes the outcome unpredictable.

For the President, however, these warnings would be exaggerations by the media. He is not alone in defending such a position. A considerable part of those who identify themselves as right wing also believes that the media exaggerates the dangers of the new coronavirus.

To some extent, the polarization of opinions when it comes to politics is considered normal—and even beneficial to the health of democracy. In countries where parties organize and present ideologically distinct proposals, the electorate is better able to distinguish them when voting. Unlike other countries, Brazil has 33 officially registered parties, and other 75 trying to receive official recognition. In this scenario, the Brazilian multiparty system deviates considerably from the notion of electoral accountability, most important in majoritarian democratic models.

It turns out that the polarization in Brazil today goes a step further. Voters of different ideologies have different opinions even on the crisis of the new coronavirus. The disease has been politicized, something that can have serious consequences.

Individuals aligned with a right-wing ideology think that the media exaggerates the coronavirus crisis, as mentioned above. Those on the left do not miss the opportunity and use possibly exaggerated expressions, referring the President as genocidal, although his actions may have indeed contributed to the large spread of the virus. The differences persist with other opinions and attitudes even with regard to the use of non-approved medicines including chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine. While former Health Minister Mandetta was more caution in the use of such medication, waiting the scientific evidence to appear, President Bolsonaro advocated the indiscriminate use of the drug which in the end caused shortage of supply in regular pharmacies. In particular, people on the right are more likely to think that the outbreak of the new coronavirus is little or nothing serious, in addition to being much less likely to support stricter and more restrictive measures of social isolation with a false dilemma between health vs. economy persisting.

The links between right wing and rejection of traditional media are observed. They now appear related to reticent positions concerning the new coronavirus. By politicizing the pandemic, Bolsonaro encouraged the population to act against the policies of the World Health Organization itself. On the other hand, a good part of the right was already inclined to do this in mid-March, especially when it rejected the traditional press and by relying on news disseminated by social networks, the terrain where fake news freely circulates.

One of the consequences of the polarization of the COVID-19 debate is the difficulty of changing the views of those who, driven by



the political debate, believe that the pandemic is not a serious one. This creates enormous difficulty for the authorities at state or municipal level, Former Minister of Health included, who need to convince the population to stay at home to avoid an explosion of new cases and to prevent the health system from being overburdened.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

**Jair Leao:** Conceptualization, Writing-original draft, Writing-review & editing.

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