

LIFE IN ACADEMIA: A CONVERSATION

MATILDA DHIMA, DMD, MS

INTERVIEWS & CONVERSATIONS





In mid-May, the ACP hosted a phone conversation between Dr. Lily Garcia and Dr. Matilda Dhima. Dr. Garcia has had a distinguished career in academia that includes a tenure as the ACP President and Chair of the American Dental Education Association. She is currently the Associate Dean for Education at the University of Iowa College of Dentistry. Dr. Dhima's career is just beginning. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Dental Medicine. She completed her residency at the Mayo Clinic, Department of Dental Specialties where she remains the first and only resident to be awarded the academic title of Assistant Professor in Mayo Clinic College of Medicine.

While their careers may be at different stages, Dr. Garcia and Dr. Dhima noted many similar issues when discussing women in academia and in the field of prosthodontics. They discussed career choices, the impact of student debt, and ways their gender does and does not influence their career as female prosthodontist academicians.

LILY T. GARCIA DDS, MS, FACP

Matilda Dhima [MD] Lily, as a woman, but also as someone very prominent in the profession, based on what you have accomplished, what have you found to be a helpful tool that, or even relationships that we as women can develop in our profession to grow, not only professionally but also to support the many academies and organizations that represent our field? I feel as if there are not a lot of women present in the leadership positions, and you are one of the few women that have been able to accomplish that. What have you found to be helpful throughout the years, to get more of us in those positions?

Lily Garcia [LG] First, thank you. In prosthodontics, as you know, there're so many different organizations. I worked so hard to become a specialist, I feel like I wanted to give my time to my specialty organization. There are so many wonderful academies and associations that are related, what Deal Chandler calls 'Sister Organizations' that I realized I couldn't do a lot for everything. So, I couldn't be as active in other organizations like the The Hispanic Dental Association, but offer my support by maintaining membership. You realize you have limited time, so you think, 'Where does your passion lie?' And, number one, I felt an allegiance; my first allegiance is to my specialty. It's just learning



AS A FOURTH-YEAR DENTAL STUDENT IN 2008, DR. MATILDA DHIMA WON FIRST PLACE AT THE ACP TABLE CLINIC SESSION.

that focus over time, yet, early on I thought you had to say "yes" to every opportunity, I didn't know you could say "no".

I was a member early in the ACP so the year after I finished my residency, I was back at the meeting, and I don't think I've missed a meeting since. That is my network.

[MD] I would love to be a part of that meeting. It definitely does feel like this the one that you would just feel so special to be a part of that group, so it's wonderful to hear that you've invested so much of your time and effort into that.

[LG] What's nice is in the ACP Educators Group since that group is even smaller. Those are people who're doing what you're doing. That's how the group didn't seem so big, because I started with that smaller group, that group that you're going to see a lot of over the years.

Cortino Sukotjo [CS] Lily, what influenced you in your academic career? I know you are Associate Dean right now, and before that, you were a department chair. How did you manage your career to reach these positions of authority?

[LG] I never deliberately said 'I'm going to be a chair,' or, 'I'm going to be a dean.' I wasn't thinking like that. I just had opportunities, and sometimes opportunities are right in front of you, and some people don't see that chance. I was in practice in Denver and a position opened up, and I thought, 'well, I'll teach part time, that'll be fun' because my practice was slow to start and I had time, so I started teaching part time. And then this one guy retired early, and they asked me would I help out, and I said, 'Sure!' I didn't know you should have a course ready. At that time, we had slides, and I basically had four slides for a course that was going to start in two weeks. And so my dean, who was wonderful, Dr. Bob Averbach, said, "Just remember, stay a chapter ahead of the students, they won't know any differently, because you know this stuff, they don't!"



DR. LILY GARCIA, TOP OF HER RESIDENCY!

And so, I called my mentors in San Antonio and they sent me tests, and notes, and syllabi to help me be successful. And in two weeks, I started the course, and I was just about a week ahead of schedule. Before my eight o'clock class, at six a.m., there I am loading slides into carousels, because I had just picked them up wherever I got the slides printed.

Anyway, it's the idea that if somebody offers you something and it's something you enjoy, why not? And so when the Department Chair position came open, I was on the search committee and Dr. Larry

Meskin, the editor of the JADA, chaired the search committee. As I looked at some of the applicants, I made a little comment, "Boy, if they're applying, why don't I apply?" He looked at me and he says, "Okay, we're kicking you off the committee. Why don't you apply?" And I was like 'No! I was just kidding! And he said, "No, I want you to apply." My parents always said, when you can be in charge, why wouldn't you want to? You get to direct your own path. So, it wasn't any magic. And believe me, sometimes, you know, saying flip remarks, doesn't always work out well. People use the word serendipity, it's chance, and you're at the right place at the right time.

[CS] Did you get a lot of support from your peers, either from Iowa or from Texas?

[LG] My best support was and is the prosthodontist I married, David Bohnenkamp. And then, it was the Dean, who had a lot of faith in me, and then the previous Department Chair, who was a great general dentist and supported me a great deal. And they just kept saying 'you can do it!' and like I said, I turned back to my mentors in San Antonio. Drs. Ken Rudd, Robert Morrow, Ken Stewart, Bill Kuebker, it's these people you read about all the time that said, 'How can we help you?' And that's where I had the support, because you have to understand, you're in a competitive

environment. Sometimes your competitors, not that they're nefarious, they're just there to just say, 'okay, let's see if you can do it.' Not that they want to cause you harm, but they may not be the first to help you. I think, Matilda, you were saying something like, part of this is starting your network, having a special group of colleagues from your university and see them at a meeting and say, 'Can we have a cup of coffee?' You talk to people, and as friends they can tell you, 'that stinks, don't try that,' or, 'that's not a good idea,' someone who can be honest with you.

[MD] Yes. I think that's very important in the environment where we are in, be it in a practice or a teaching environment. Not everyone surrounding us shares the same interests as us, which can make that environment a bit discouraging at times. But, I think it's important just to keep your aspirations and your dreams and your goals and your network outside of an environment that may not be as excited as you are about all of the lectures, and all of the research, and all of that good stuff, and it seems like you were very fortunate to have that, and it's really wonderful to know that great support can...

[LG] Well think about you, you got into Mayo! They accept one? One? That had to be a little competitive!

[MD] You know, as you were talking, I thought, 'maybe it was just meant to be.' If I didn't finish high school in three years, I could not have applied that year, and I'm thinking kind of the stars aligned, like you said, those serendipitous moments. I did have support and I had wonderful mentors and people that helped me and guided me so I am very thankful to them for being able to get to Mayo and learn as much as I did, and I feel very fortunate now, at this stage in my career to have had that opportunity. And that was part me, but also everyone who supported me to get to that point.

[LG] You still had to have the tickets to get there. Nobody gave you something you couldn't handle, you had to compete. Female or male, you still have to have the tickets to be there. And look at your Mayo network, you're automatically part of an important network.

[MD] And a great tradition as well. Like you were talking about those people that write all the books that we learn from, and it's wonderful. I feel very fortunate to have them as people who taught me professionally but also as friends, like you said, someone you can go have coffee with and connect, it's really wonderful.

[LG] Matilda, I've been told by women like in my cohort, my age range, they're saying because we competed, we didn't compete as women. Instead we competed and worked in a predominantly

male environment. Do you see that there's a need to have a separate type of arena for just women's issues? Whether you're a prosthodontist, a physician, anything?

[MD] I see there is a strong need. In the sense of not only supporting each other, the reality is that the majority of our colleagues are males. And we want them to understand how, from our point of view, our role in the field is important. But also, we do struggle a little bit, not only to fit into the environment, which has been for a long time male dominated, but also to really feel a part of it, and I think for someone in my career, at my stage, I really do feel it. I work in a hospital environment, in a practice environment, and in a school environment, and I also provide maxillofacial prosthetic treatment, so I'm also related to fields like Ear, Nose & Throat and Plastic Surgery, and they are even more male dominated than we are. Sometimes I feel as if it's easier for me to connect with them than it is with people in my profession. Maybe it's because they have longer experience with women in their profession than we do.

I also think there is a large generational gap, and we see that in our academic institutions as well. So I don't think it's gender only, I think it's also a generational difference. The way that we communicate and connect with each other is very different as well. I find that

sometimes maybe my generation would be more up-front and forthcoming than people in the later generations. I think that has a great impact, in addition to gender.

So, yes, we do need to be more connected to each other. Right now, I can tell you that it's hard for me to find a female in my field where I can just pick up the phone and say, 'Lily, this is what I ran into today at work. What are your thoughts on this?' I have a whole list of male colleagues and mentors.

[LG] I remember being insulted at work. I was home fussing about, and my husband says, 'Well, why didn't you just slap him?' And I said, "Well, if I slapped everybody that insulted me, I would be in really good shape!" So, I handle it with humor and try to handle difficult people in a different way, to control the situation. Sometimes, I'm sure I would have liked to have punched somebody, but I chose not to handle it that way. And you're right, sometimes it's nice to call somebody and just say, 'What would you have done?', just listen.

There's a more diverse environment now than when I went to dental school. We had a class of 140, there were 18 women, no African Americans, probably 3 Hispanics, and the rest were white.

Now, it's so different in our classes, and I love it. It's just this rich environment where you can learn from so many different people. That too is different, because how many women were in your class, and what was the ethnicity of your class?

[MD] Very diverse, and I think we don't understand each other's cultures. Like you said you were raised in the South, well I was raised in Europe and here in the States, and it's very different. I don't know that we know enough about each other to respect our differences and understand where everyone is coming from.

[LG] When they talk about the civil rights movement, in South Texas, it was white against "Mexicans." That's the environment I was raised in. But this is a challenge to all of us - you have to give people respect to start with. Then they can lose the respect by their behavior, but you start on the positive.

[MD] Yes, always assume good intentions.

Alethea Gerding [AG] And that's a segue into the next question we had for Lily. She's talking about the environment changing over the course of her lifetime. How do you feel the work environment, especially for women in academia, has changed through the

course of your career, in some ways for better, and perhaps some ways for worse?

[LG] I tend to see it for better. Whenever I see a young colleague who's pregnant, I'll go tell her, 'You take as much time as you humanly can, that you can afford.' I just talked to [Mary Walker](#), and she said, 'I was back in practice within two weeks!' For me, I took six weeks off because that's all the vacation and sick leave I had. And I was back, and still thought I had waited too long to go back, because you felt like you had to be there to prove something. And now I don't think you have to prove something because the environment now is such that you should be able to take the time needed.

[AG] Do you feel that that has also benefited men? Because I feel like men too now feel like they can take some time, and maybe women set the example for them that way.

[LG] Yeah, and I'm not just talking about the family issue, but in this environment, it makes it better for everyone. It's not this guilt factor, and it shouldn't be a bullying environment for students or for faculty. Your work environment is so important and becoming humanistic for students, but think about it for faculty as well. It's just a better work environment. I don't know about you Matilda,

because you're going back and forth between a hospital and an academic environment, and I'm not even talking about the practice environment.

[AG] One thing that's changed for the worse is the level and the impact that student debt has on peoples' career choices. Matilda, I was wondering how student debt has affected your choices.

[MD] I had to choose whether to go completely into a private practice environment or education or a combination of both. They were not completely impacted by my student loan debt, but it was certainly one of the factors that I had to consider because as we all know, student debt unfortunately is something that we cannot escape. At the end of the month, the bills have to be paid, and for someone starting out right away, I think it may have been a bit discouraging to jump right into a private practice environment when gathering hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt that you have to start paying in about six months. But I don't see that as a step back, I see it as a possibility to maybe do more than just a private practice environment, go to teaching or if there is a love of academia, than maybe be involved in a research project that can be fulfilling and rewarding not always financially, but also for a career. It was not the determining factor, but it certainly had an impact.

I was fortunate enough to actually receive a stipend during my time as a resident and fellow, and I know not everyone has that opportunity. I had more flexibility than others where I could have a combination of hospital practice and teaching education. And I loved both of them, and I felt fortunate that I could accomplish both while paying the student loans, and enjoy what I do every day maybe a little bit more. I think that's also very important.

To think of being in debt two to three hundred thousand dollars and even half a million dollars, it's scary for not having worked until the age of 30 or 32 when you finish all the training. It's quite scary and you see your friends, who already have steady jobs, and they got a Master's degree or a PhD or even just finished college, and you haven't really worked a full day in your life, or for quite some time. I think that in academia there may be opportunities to have the loan forgiveness plan if you teach for a certain amount of time, but that was not introduced until more recently. There are faculty repayment programs for every state, but some of them require support from the institution that you're in, or they require the institution to match those funds, and the answer is not always yes, sometimes institutions are really strapped for funds, and even though they may want to support and help you, it's not always

possible. I think everything has to be within the context of what you love to do, while paying the bills every month.

[LG] I'll add on to that. I didn't come from a wealthy family, I came from a big family, I'm number five out of seven, so there was already a line of people going "through that payroll." My parents helped me through college along with scholarships, so I graduated from college without debt. Then when I went to dental school, I went into debt. At that time, it was probably in the high forty thousands, relatively high for that time, but I also was able to work; I worked part time jobs including waiting tables, drew blood, all kinds of odd jobs. Now, we highly discourage students from working because the curriculum is so overloaded. I didn't know how I was going to pay back my debt, and I thought I would be in private practice. I was absolutely certain - 100% - that I was going into practice.

You don't want to live like a dentist when you're going to dental school. As a resident in San Antonio we had an annual salary of \$8,600 as the stipend, and I thought, 'I'm in hog heaven, this is great! I've never made this much money!' and, I didn't know you could live better than that. I think the first job offer I got was like \$35,000 a year, so when you go from making \$8,600 to \$35,000, you're thinking 'wow!', but to live in Dallas, it was very low for the

Dallas market. So that was tough. That was why I was always going to be private practice, in my mind. And then I went the farthest from that that I could have imagined. But I've had a lot of professional opportunities and filled with gratitude. I think even more so for Matilda's generation, the debt loads are really high, and people have to be cautious of what they're deciding. I can't imagine now, graduating with over \$300,000 in debt, that's got to be overwhelming.

[MD] It is, and a lot of students and graduates are in that position, it's tough. And it makes everything else more challenging, starting a family, purchasing a home, even buying a car is a decision that has to be very well thought out. It's very difficult for things that used to be considered quite basic for the next stage in life.

[AG] We sometimes hear that it's more difficult for women to be published, or to receive tenure and promotion particularly in the science fields. Has this been something that either of you have experienced in this field? Especially to Lily, is this something you've experienced in the past; is it something that you see improving? Or is prosthodontics different?

[LG] I can't speak to differences in the specialties, and frankly, for most journals and review processes, authorship is blinded, so you

can't distinguish if it's a woman writing or a man writing. For me, to go it alone, to be sole author is difficult. I've seen lack of credit and wonder why not offer credit when earned... what would it have cost them to connect and contribute when appropriate? So, yes, it is competitive, and I don't know if it's limited to whether or not you are a woman or a man, it's just competitive. I don't know your environment for tenure and promotion, Matilda. I've seen most universities don't distinguish between men and women, maybe it's very subtle in a hidden kind of way, I just haven't seen that.

[MD] I did not experience that during my time at Mayo. When I was a resident and fellow, I was actually promoted to Assistant Professor at the College of Medicine simply because of the accomplishments, and it was something that was quite encouraging to see. But, I was the first, and I remain the only one to have accomplished that, but I think it was because of personal initiative, and not because it comes with any greater salary.

I don't think that there are any barriers regarding gender from those who are in charge of promoting you to those academic positions. I haven't found gender to be a barrier. I have found the barrier is simply the initiative of an individual to be a part of a project or to put in the time and the effort to do that research

project or publish that article or be involved with other members of the team.

[LG] Absolutely. I will tell you having been through a couple of university systems, they're actually trying to accommodate things that may be of particular importance to a woman or a family, such as "stopping the tenure clock", so you if you're going to have a family, you can pause to allow time to achieve tenure. So there are new policies trying to accommodate people. In this new day of partnerships and family, they're trying to accommodate more people, so it's not just women, it's men as well, like you referred to earlier Alethea. They deserve the same rights to be able to be with the family to start a family as well. I think that tenure and promotion, besides tenure sometimes being questioned at some universities, they're trying to give a little bit of flexibility for people in general.

[AG] Lily, what advice would you give any young woman prosthodontist starting an academic career? And what was the best piece of advice, if any, that you ever received?

[LG] Well first, woman or not, be focused. You can't do everything. It will reflect as well in your CV if you're really interested in an area, so focus on that and try to collaborate. Like I said, some of us work really well in a collaborative way, and so it's a win-win for multiple



DR. LILY GARCIA BEING INDUCTED AS PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PROSTHODONTISTS

people. The best piece of advice? Oh, I don't know if I want you to print this, but my mother said, 'Never let them see you cry.' It implies so much, too much to explain here but it's not tears of sadness, usually it's out of frustration and anger sometimes. It was just the idea that if you're going to accept all the accolades, are you going to accept all the criticism as well? Some of your own goals have to be for your own personal satisfaction. Otherwise, you're relying on everyone else to say, 'Gee, you're doing a great job.' You have to know you're doing a good job. It has to be self-motivated. Because, just like Matilda said, promotion doesn't always mean more money, more certification doesn't translate

into more money. It's about your professional goals, and keeping that focus balanced with everything else you're doing.

[AG] Speaking of balance, Matilda, is work-life balance something you struggle with now, or have a concern with for the future? And how have you managed that balance so far?

[MD] I think wearing many hats can be very challenging for work-life balance, and I really love what Lily commented on, which is the fact that you really have to know your limits and don't say yes to everything and to everyone. I think I've learned early enough that it's very important to say yes only to the things that you know you are very good at or can contribute well to. I think that has helped me with keeping a life-to-work balance and knowing there's always going to be those times where one gets more attention than the other. I think in the future it may be more challenging as there are children introduced and maybe being caretaker for older family members, and those are all realistic things that can occur in life. I anticipate that it may be more difficult. I think our specialty is very fluent and flexible in that it allows us to work in various environments that can be fulfilling in different ways, be it full time or part time. I think it may be more difficult in the future. What do you think, Lily?

[LG] You know each generation might say the same thing. But you consider what is it you're looking for that will give you that fulfillment, or that pride in what you do. For me, my family is intact, my daughter graduated from college last week. She's a good young woman; she's has a great loving spirit. I enjoy the people I work with. I love what I'm doing.

Just try to find enjoyment in the moment. If you're always looking ahead, you miss what's right in front of you sometimes. It can be a lot of fun, and it can be challenging, not everyone is happy-go-lucky excited about doing what they're doing. But I can't own their problems; I just continue to do my job as well as I can.

[CS] Do you think that being an academic is a good career choice for a woman? Particularly in prosthodontics?

[LG] Let me put it this way; there are a lot of opportunities right now...so is it really about female or male? Or is it about what you want to do?' Now, if I were the sole provider, would I feel pressure to do something different? I don't know, because I'm not the sole provider, I'm part of a professional couple. So, if I'm graduating at this time and it's just me and I owe \$300,000, I don't know if I would make a different choice. That's a really good question. But I will tell you, in academic positions, I've gotten more joy and fulfillment out

of it my work. The young general dentists that I see years later and they're doing well when I hear back from them, or I might see them at a meeting asking, 'Do you remember me? I have five kids, and two practices!' It is highly probable they're earning more than I am, but it's not about the money, it's about the fact that I may have contributed in helping someone do well. That is professional fulfillment in of itself. I'm not this perfect person, let me tell you, but experiencing that feeling is a reward.

[MD] I think the feeling is mutual. I feel the same way. And I think it takes different personalities and aspirations to be in academia than in a private practice, and I think that can change, even in the person's lifetime and career. I am happy where I am now, but the future, like Lily said it's all about taking chances, and being open to what comes along. I truly believe in that and I think it's really one of the things that distinguishes people who enjoy what they do, and love what they do every day.

[LG] You've seen it; you work with people who seem so unhappy, and you think, 'Why are you doing this? Is it because you're bound by other reasons?' And when you're around people who really enjoy it, it's almost infectious, there's some enjoyment and pride in what you do. That is what makes our positions fun.

[LG] I've got to tell you, thank you Tino and Alethea, for connecting Matilda and me, and I'll buy you that cup of coffee, Matilda, or I'll buy you a margarita!

[MD] Yes, I would love that! How about a prosecco, I've heard those are really good.

[LG] Yeah, there you go! The thing I will tell you—I gotta credit [Nancy Arbree](#), she was the first woman president for ACP, and she had an informal breakfast in her suite her year as president. It was great! And it wasn't the idea of just women; it was the idea of great conversations in a "safe environment." I had more young colleagues come up to me and say, 'we don't even care if you buy our drinks; it's just the idea to have that environment to talk.' So I'm glad to hear you say there is a need for it, Matilda. Sometimes it's a need for a different circle, a different network.

[MD] I was at that meeting! I was a resident at the time, and I was one of those people that said, 'Gosh, I would've loved to have been at that get-together!'

[LG] I'm glad to hear it, and you don't have to buy me a drink, I'll pay for the drink!

[MD] I can't wait!