



Greener Living, Wiser Thinking

April 7, 2021



(<https://oasisdiscussions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Alida-profile-Edited.jpg>)

Dr. Alida Andersen on Dentistry and the Environment



(http://oasisdiscussions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DSC_0784_Fotor-scaled.jpg)

In May 2018 Dr. Alida Andersen, a general dentist from Toronto, settled down on her living room sofa to watch *A Plastic Ocean*, a sociopolitical documentary that was streaming on Netflix at the time. Hosted by journalist Craig Leeson, the film describes itself as a feature

length piece that “explores the fragile state of our oceans and uncovers alarming truths

about the consequences of our disposable lifestyle.” The film has won several awards including best documentary and best environmental film at the Sedona Film Festival. Sir David Attenborough called it “one of the most important films of our time” and CBC Radio Canada said it was “a film essential for the next generation.” Awards and accolades aside, Dr. Andersen was about to find out just how impactful this movie could be. Less than an hour and a half later, her perception of the toll that human activity has taken on the environment was changed forever. “It was a wake-up call,” she says. “I realized I needed to do something. Even before the show was over I was texting all of my family and friends and telling them to watch it.”

But Dr. Andersen did not stop at texting her family and friends. She was not satisfied by just being outraged at a television screen. Since that fateful day she has channelled her newfound passion into positive action by becoming a regular speaker and advocate for ecological issues. She gives lectures in schools, hosts seminars for dentists, speaks at community events, and writes articles for recognized publications including the OD Journal. She has even set up her own YouTube channel, *Alida Eco*, to raise awareness and provide practical solutions to plastic pollution, and soon plans to launch an accompanying website alidaeco.com. It is a significant commitment of time and energy, and there is no doubt that Dr. Andersen is up for the challenge. “Between

“It made everything so connected and I realized that this was not someone else’s concern. This concerns me and everyone else. If you’re living on the planet, it concerns you.”

juggling work at the practice and raising two young children, I realized there wasn’t enough time for everything. And so, for the past few years I have taken one day a week away from dentistry to devote time and energy to my advocacy work.”

PAGEANTRY AND THE MEDIA

(http://oasisdiscussions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/miss-iran-1b-_Fotor2-scaled.jpg)Originally from Iran, Dr. Andersen moved to Canada in 1994. She knew from an early age that she wanted to be a dentist. She was drawn to the combination of medicine and art - the opportunity to work with her hands and to work with patients. Like most people embarking on a career in dentistry, she had to work hard to get where she is today. Five years of undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto, followed by four years of dental school at the University of Western Ontario, eventually led to her achieving her goal of becoming a dentist in 2009.



But during her college years, getting through dental school was not the only thing on Dr. Andersen's agenda. She also developed a keen interest in pageantry and media work. In December 2000 she was crowned Miss Iran-Canada, and a year later went on to become Miss Ontario. During her third year of dental school, she started acting on the weekends, featuring in a popular satellite TV series, *Leila*, and in 2008 she starred in a short film *Beyond The Mind*. Although she describes her experience in the world of media production as "fun" and "something I was doing on the side," it seems clear that it also armed her with a unique skillset that lends itself to advocacy and public appearance. "I got a lot of experience going on TV, interviewing and public speaking," she says. "Because of that I feel comfortable in front of a camera or speaking to a roomful of people. I wanted to put some of those skills to a good cause."

One could be forgiven for thinking that Dr. Andersen's infectious smile and upbeat temperament are at odds with the gravity of the situation – the catastrophic impact of human activity on the environment – but then I quickly realize that this is part of her method and her charm. She is not here to point fingers or to speak down to anybody,

and she has long since acknowledged that she is as much a part of the problem as anybody else. No. Dr. Andersen's mind is firmly set on the facts, and on finding positive solutions to those facts.

THE IMPACT OF DENTISTRY ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Somewhere in the region of 12 million tonnes of plastic waste ends up in our oceans each year. That's equivalent to dumping a full garbage truck of waste into the ocean every minute. Some estimates suggest that by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean and whether we want to admit it or not, a proportion of that plastic originates from healthcare-related activity, including dentistry. Given the new PPE demands introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, these figures are certain to rise. Dr. Susan Fulop, a general dentist and fellow environmental advocate from Kitchener ON, conservatively estimates that dental offices in Ontario alone may well dispose of up to 30 million sets of PPE this year. And this figure does not include dental hygienists. Worldwide it is estimated that frontline healthcare workers are currently using 89 million masks, 30 million gowns, and 76 million gloves every month.

The numbers are staggering, and part of the problem is the sheer scale of the challenge - the idea that environmental pollution is such a big problem that we as individuals cannot make a significant difference. For this reason, Dr. Andersen believes that the necessary change starts with a shift in mindset, an acceptance of personal responsibility and an acknowledgment that we cannot be perfect when it comes to environmental waste, no matter how deeply we care. "The first step is really to own this," she says. "It is not a separate entity from you. Accept that there is a problem and don't be overwhelmed by it. Believe that the tiniest action you take in a single day matters. The moment you decide you want to do better as an individual and not wait for others to fix the problem, many little changes happen."

Dr. Andersen points to some easy fixes around the dental office: bamboo tooth brushes, reusable gowns, paper cups and digital scanners. She also encourages dentists to demand more environmentally friendly options from dental suppliers, something which there is a dire shortage of. “We need people to *think* differently. Part of the message to dental suppliers is to give dentists options. If they hear it enough they will meet the demand. We are the consumers and therefore the ones who drive the market.”

But what about recycling? Aren't we already busy separating out the used plastics in our office into dedicated bins? Don't they take what is in those bins and reprocess it and turn it into something useful? “The recycling of plastic is a huge myth,” says Dr. Andersen. “Only 9% of plastic gets recycled. That means 91% ends up in lakes, landfill or the ocean. An illusion has been created that it's okay to buy plastic and put it in the recycling bin. But that's not okay. Almost none of it gets recycled. The mentality should not be to rely on recycling, it should be to *rethink, refuse, reuse*, and only then *recycle*.”

LONG TERM

(<http://oasisdiscussions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Alida-Family-Edited.jpg>)

In the longer term, Dr. Andersen would like to see dentists become more engaged. To connect with like-minded dentists who are passionate about the environment. As far as she is concerned, healthcare professionals are not only accountable for the health of their patients but also the health of the planet. Recent studies have shown that plastics are now passing through our bloodstream. We are eating, drinking and breathing microplastic and nanoplastic, and early indicators point towards significant health implications including cancer and infertility. One study published in the January 2021 edition of *Environment International* has confirmed the presence of microplastic fragments in the placentas of expectant mothers. “As doctors who want to do the best for our patients, how can we ignore this? It is part of our responsibility. We cannot

separate the two things,” says Dr. Andersen. To this end, she has teamed up with fellow dentists and environmental advocates Dr. Susanne Fulop and Dr. Lori Houston to tackle the issue head on. Dr. Andersen and Dr. Fulop are also developing a new website, greenerdentistry.com, where they will publish regular advice and solutions specifically for the dental profession. The website is scheduled to launch next year and Dr. Andersen hopes that through regular engagement Canadian dentists can become a leading light for positive change in the healthcare sector.

“We don’t give ourselves enough credit. We think of our efforts as just one drop in the ocean. But I want people to think differently. Every single one of us has the power to make a difference. We need a shift in cultural mindset and then we will get a wave of change. After all, the ocean is made up of tiny drops of water.”

How can we ignore this? The question lingers long after our conversation has ended. Because this is everybody’s fault, right? It’s everybody’s fault and it’s everybody’s responsibility, and that’s part of the problem. We’ve come to think of ourselves as just one more person who doesn’t matter, who can’t make a difference to the 12 million tonnes of waste that ends up in the ocean every year. Dr. Andersen begs to differ. She suggests this is precisely why we are in the mess we are in today and is asking people to change. Because this dentist believes she *can* make a difference, and she’s decided to do something about it. She’s decided to change the way she thinks and she wants you to do the same.





(<http://oasisdiscussions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Gabriels-Poc-scaled.jpg>) Gabriel Fulcher is Digital Content Editor for CDA Oasis. He is an Ottawa-based writer who specializes in medical, scientific, and health-related content. He holds a BSc in Health-related Sciences and an MFA in Creative Writing from University College Dublin, Ireland.



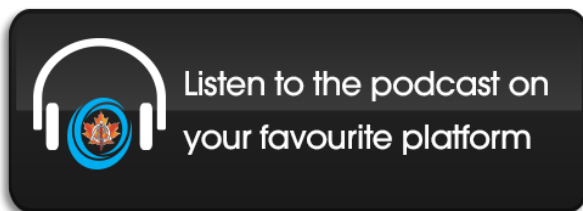
(<https://instagram.com/cdaoasis>)



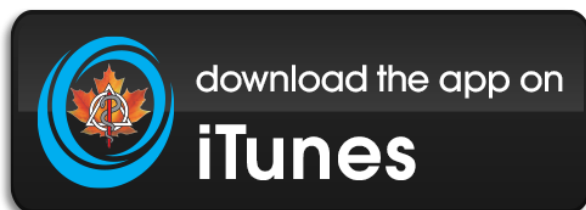
(<https://twitter.com/jcdaoasis>)



(<https://www.facebook.com/oasisdiscussions>)



(<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/cda-oasis/id1482271062>)



(<https://apps.apple.com/ca/app/cda-oasis/id948258666>)



(https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=hr.apps.n168412635&hl=en_CA)

PREVIOUS ARTICLE

Managing an Asthma Emergency In the Dental Office (<https://oasisdiscussions.ca/2021/04/07/managing-an-asthma-emergency-in-the-dental-office-2/>)

NEXT ARTICLE

What is Gingival Thickness and Why is it Important? (<https://oasisdiscussions.ca/2021/04/07/what-is-gingival-thickness-and-why-is-it-important/>)

1 Comment



Tracy Tambosso (<http://www.granbyriverdental.com>) • April 7, 2021

I have gone to a digital scanner and am fairly horrified by the amount of plastic/solvent waste that happens at the dental lab with digital printing/milling. Are there any comparative studies on impression/stone waste vs plastic waste in dental labs? My lab offers a completely digital format for straightforward, single unit cases but I believe printing/milling is still the standard. I'm worried that the digital solution looks good to the dentist but is actually more harmful to the planet.

Reply (<https://oasisdiscussions.ca/2021/04/07/greener-living-wiser-thinking/?replytocom=175116#respond>)

Leave a Comment

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Your Comment

Name

Email

Website

- ☐ Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.
- ☐ Notify me of follow-up comments by email.
- ☐ Notify me of new posts by email.

Post Comment

Select an image for your comment (GIF, PNG, JPG, JPEG):

No file chosen

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is not intended to substitute for appropriate clinical training.

[Read more... \(http://www.cda-adc.ca/en/disclaimer.asp\)](http://www.cda-adc.ca/en/disclaimer.asp)

©Canadian Dental Association