

The girl with red lips

Juliana de Meis died on July 16th, 2021, one day before her 49th birthday, when she was reaching the brightest side of her career.

A biologist with a M.Sc. in Parasite Biology and a Ph.D. in Cellular and Molecular Biology, both at the Oswaldo Cruz Institute, FIOCRUZ – Rio de Janeiro, Juliana had always worked on Chagas disease, mostly experimentally. A bench fan and eager to learn, she was also prone to teach and share knowledge. Her dedication went beyond the graduate students through her interest in scientific dissemination, another subject inherited from her father, Leopoldo de Meis, an awarded Brazilian scientist. Juliana was always enthusiastic when it came to organize shows, theater plays and whatever other means to share knowledge with the young people and foster their curiosity!

She had a special way of caring for others – a humanitarian scientist who started working at the bench in experimental Chagas disease, classically transmitted through an insect bite! Lately, however, oral transmission became the commonest infection form of the Chagas disease in Brazil, accounting for more than 80% of the infected patients, mostly in the State of Pará. Juliana followed the evidence and set up an experimental mouse model of Oral Chagas Disease. Besides establishing the model, the mediators of severe disease and route of entry, she went to Pará and met the riverside population. This was enough for her to decide, as a humanist, that something else could be done to this population. Almost immediately, Juliana found out that there was a need for training the microscopists on Chagas Disease diagnosis. She elaborated not only the “Chagas Disease Manual for basic microscopists of the State of Pará”, but also a training course for them.

She was on the top of her career... working on basic science and doing what I call humanitarian science... but suddenly the pandemic hit us! Again, Juliana joined us in a project to study a cohort of health workers and SARS-CoV2 infection. Tireless and always close to the working team, she took care of all of us, from providing personal security equipment to helping on sample collection. There she was, minimizing risks for all of us, not allowing people in risk groups to circulate, protecting everyone.

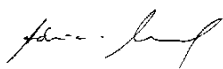
And then she got infected.... None of us could believe... “She will be fine”, we thought. She was young, healthy and had already taken one dose of the vaccine ... but this was not enough for such disease.

Juliana died, it was a catastrophe. It was a catastrophe for us. A fact that expanded beyond our personal feelings. A fact that brought us the inequities and policies involving public health.

We learned how science and knowledge can impact public decisions.

We learned how deeply it impacted us.

We learned from our little “red lips” humanitarian girl that science is for the society.



Adriana Bonomo