



My World

Maria João Cardoso is head breast surgeon at the Champalimaud Cancer Centre in Lisbon. She founded the patient support centre Mama Help, and leads a research group at the Institute for Systems and Computer Engineering, in Porto, on improving outcomes in breast reconstruction.

■ Why I chose to work in cancer

Because it was and still is a mysterious disease with so many things yet to discover. Working in an institution dedicated to translational research, and being a part of the process, makes your career much more interesting.

■ What I love most about my job

Patients' gratitude! When a patient looks at you as the one who pushed death away, it has a profound effect on you.

■ The hardest thing about my job

When disease progresses and we have to tell patients the bad news. In those moments you feel your patient's despair as if it were your own. But you have to move on and learn to deal with that feeling.

■ What I've learnt about myself

That patients are my best teachers. They are usually strong and optimistic and even when they are facing a difficult situation, they manage to see the best side of it. I've learnt from their examples and found ways to use what I've learnt.

■ I'll never forget...

The opening of our first support centre for breast cancer patients in 2011, called

Mama Help. It was a project in my head for almost 10 years. Being able to transform it into reality, and watching the benefit it brings to patients... simply marvellous!

■ A high point in my career

The invitation by Dra. Fátima Cardoso, director of the Breast Unit, to be the head breast surgeon at the Champalimaud Cancer Centre. I felt very important and honoured. To be able to work with one of the best specialists in breast cancer in the world was a dream come true.

■ I wish I were better at...

Being more tolerant with others. When you work hard you tend to evaluate others by your own parameters and it can often be difficult to accept even minor failures. I feel that younger doctors are sometimes really afraid of me – I can see it in their faces!

■ What I value most in a colleague

Honesty. When you work in a team, your input, as well as others', is important to achieve the best results. Intellectual and scientific honesty are fundamental ingredients.

■ The most significant advance in my specialty in recent years

Immediate breast reconstruction and sentinel node biopsy. Quality of life is very important, particularly with prolonged survival. These procedures offer patients two major improvements in their quality of life.

■ My advice to someone entering my specialty today would be...

Be a hard worker. You will not achieve anything without hard work. When you love this work you never stop. You finish your appointments when your patients want you to, not when you finish your daily agenda! And after 12 hours of surgery and an absolutely impossible week you still spend your weekend correcting articles or rushing to meet research deadlines.

■ What I wish I'd learnt at medical school

Health economics. When you start working, you have no idea about health costs. We have learnt to act as others before us did. Private and public medicine has enormous costs and oncology is one of its major consumers. To serve patients better we need to have at least some idea of how much it will cost to treat them. ■