

They haven't gone away. We know

***** Personally, I have a lot of sympathy for Loyalist outrage at the limits on when the Union Flag (memo to RTÉ: it's 'Union Flag' and not 'Union Jack') flies at City Hall in Belfast.

After all, you don't get people in Wales saying they find it offensive. And regardless of what the Shinnars and the Alliance Party would like us to believe they are still a part of the United Kingdom.

But having said that, Nordies of all persuasions seem incapable of

having a rational debate without resorting to petrol bombs and riots.

But we shouldn't be too smug down South, either.

The Continuity IRA, the Real IRA, the actual IRA (what's next, The People's Front Of Judea?) and all the other groups of thugs pretending to be 'patriots' have been growing in confidence in the last 12 months.

And they further proved that in Limerick the other day when

Republican Sinn Féin held an open rally and march in Limerick and threatened to kill any Irish person who joins the British armed forces.

Someone called Michael Kiely read from a statement and said: "The moment you don a British uniform you become a legitimate target for the IRA."

Well, following that logic, I presume Mr Kiely now accepts that he is a legitimate target for British special forces?

Of course! It all makes sense!

***** Anyone with any interest in the wackier elements of American politics will be aware of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones.

And he has just come up with another cracker.

Piers Morgan, as you know, has been attracting the rather hilarious ire of American gun nuts and Jones appeared on Morgan's CNN show to berate the Brit for his pantywaist views on assault rifles.

But it turns out that the recent mass shootings in the States are not the fault of guns.

No, apparently, they have all been caused by something called "mass murder suicide pills".

And what are they when they're home?

Well, apparently, "mass murder suicide pills" are... Prozac.

So, don't worry about the guy coming towards you with a gun.

Just run away from the guy who tells you he is on Prozac.

For years, dentists have ordered us to floss. Is it a waste of time?

Helen Rumbelow meets the woman behind a revolution

A little while ago, David Sedaris, the American humourist, took as his subject

European dental care. He had, he wrote in *The New Yorker*, proudly told his French dentist he had been flossing every night. "Hey," she retorted, "enough with the flossing. You have better ways to spend your evenings."

To an American audience this was a cue for big laughs. Big, white, toothy laughs, from the nation that invented dental floss and went on to elevate flossing to the status of semi-religious devotion — they use nearly five million kilometres of it a year. Americans don't flagellate themselves, they attack their teeth with nylon wire until they sting and bleed. And now, increasingly, so do we.

I laughed at the Sedaris piece myself, probably even while flossing. Probably even in bed, for you do not know true intimacy until you have flossed in the presence of your loved one.

According to Clint Eastwood's former partner Sondra Locke, in her book *The Good, the Bad and the Very Ugly*, the Hollywood star would whisper, "Sweetie, did you floss?" as a prelude to sex.

We all know we should floss, even if we don't. The sight of a floss packet triggers a secular guilt. But what if we don't need to floss? What if the reproachful sermon of every dentist you have ever known, to floss more, floss harder, was wrong? What if we looked back on ourselves 50 years from now and laughed at our attempts to clean our teeth by wedging bits of string between them?

Well, I discovered a dentist who believes just that. My first instinct when Ellie Phillips cheerfully told me, "Oh, I haven't flossed in 20 years, and I've never taught any of my children to either," was of utter shock.

Are dentists even allowed to say this? Don't they get struck down by some flossing god? My second thought was that she was obviously a kook, not aided by the fact that her book is somewhat jauntily entitled *Kiss Your Dentist Goodbye*.

But it turns out that Dr Phillips was one of the first female dentists trained by Guy's Hospital in London in the 1960s. On her first day in the job in a school clinic she

faced a row of 20 children with teeth to be extracted — "strained little faces looked at me with round moist eyes".

She vowed then to devote herself to preventative dentistry. Her work took her to America, where she is now based; her book is endorsed by Richard Carmona, the former Surgeon General of the United States. And its 21 pages of footnoted references to scientific studies lead to astounding conclusions: first, that flossing is useless at preventing tooth decay.

Yes, you heard that right. In all the reviews of flossing studies, no amount of flossing — daily, twice daily — has shown any reduction in your chances of tooth decay.

There was only one exception: in which

schoolchildren received a professional 15-minute flossing from a hygienist five days a week for nearly two years.

But, writes Phillips in her book, despite a total lack of evidence for the preventative effect of flossing on tooth decay, "dentists have repeated the flossing mantra for 50 years".

So, I accept the challenge. I go to my hygienist. She gives my mouth, at best, six out of 10, despite my usual guilty frenzy of flossing in the weeks leading up to the visit. Will she, I manage to mumble as she scrapes gunk out of my gums, be able to tell if I stop flossing?

"Of course," she says. "Your gums will bleed and there will be plaque climbing the walls."

I tell her I will do something different, I won't tell her what, and be back in one month, the minimum amount of time Phillips says that her system takes to see results.

I stop flossing, and head straight to the supermarket to stock up. Half of the effectiveness of Phillips's system, she says, is from using mouthwash, the other half from eating xylitol, a natural type of sugar alternative that comes from birch trees.

The underlying basis of her approach, as one dentist



Smile! I don't floss, I eat sweets, and my teeth are clean

My dental health plan

1 Neutralise the mouth: Ultradox. Using a pre-rinse means you don't brush on teeth softened by acidic food. Ultradox contains chlorine dioxide, which has been proven to remove bacteria.

2 After brushing teeth: Listerine Original. The original version has the best results in clinical trials.

This has provoked controversy because of a potential link between mouthwashes containing alcohol and oral cancer, but the American Dental Association has declared that there is no evidence to support this fear.

3 Final fluoride rinse: Fluorid or similar fluoride rinses are proven to help strengthen and repair teeth, especially if used last thing at night.

4 Look for 100pc xylitol. Sweets such as Smints and many popular gums that contain xylitol are not suitable, as their xylitol content is diluted by other sweeteners.

Only Peppersmith makes mints and gum sweetened with pure xylitol on the high street, but you can find lots of alternatives on the internet. (Peppersmith peppermint chewing gum, £1.42, ecogreenstore.co.uk).

Also, packs of granulated xylitol can be found in the sugar aisle of most big supermarkets. An effective dose is about 6g a day. It's safe even at much higher doses, but you might find that it has a slight laxative effect.



Lock him up and throw away the key

***** The other day I wrote about the Leeds youngster who landed himself in hot water when he used his mother's makeup to darken his skin so he could look like El Hadji Diouf.

Now it's Ruud Van Nistelrooy's turn to feel the belt of the politically correct crosier.

The former United great (pictured) dressed as Balthazar, one of the three kings, as he visited the sick in a hospital in Marbella to hand out presents.

This immediately caused mass hysteria from people who attacked the footballer on Twitter for "perpetuating racist stereotypes".

Maybe it's just me but are these people not missing the point?

After all, from looking at the pictures of the sick patients, none of them seemed offended, they were just delighted to meet a great footballer making a nice gesture and briefly brightening up their day.

Okay then — it is just me.

Um, slight overreaction perhaps?

***** Frankly, it's the little things in life that make us all want to go on a killing spree.

Take your bins, for instance.

You have green ones, black ones, yellow ones, and bin-related issues reached farcical levels over the Christmas when a friend of mine had her bin tags stolen, which is surely the worst theft ever.

But when they're not collected on time, it's a right pain in the bum — so how do you react?

Well, in my case I just grumble and mutter darkly under my breath and then... bravely do absolutely nothing about it.

But some people are more proactive.

A well known Finglas criminal

has been arrested after he stuck a gun in the face of a bin collector — because they were late picking up his bins.

Now, obviously nobody would ever dream of condoning producing a fire arm in any circumstance.

But you kinda have to admire this guy's dedication to domestic hygiene.

Look, I'm sorry — another CBB story

***** I'm convinced that our culture is slowly imploding.

And *Celebrity Big Brother* certainly fits into that bill.

Now, I can take the crassness, the vulgarity, the ignorance, but what I really love is the hypocrisy of the producers when they try to take the moral high ground.

This happened on Monday when contestant Paula Hamilton was reprimanded after she said her living quarters were "just like Auschwitz".

Now apart from the absence of kapos, guard dogs, SS officers, selections, gas chambers, ovens and mass graves she may have had a point.

But I loved the reprimand she got from the programme, telling her that they "would not tolerate offensive language that might offend some people".

That lofty claim might have held a bit more weight if they hadn't invited Jim Davidson on to this year's show until he was arrested.

After all, everything that man says is offensive to someone...



Pioneer: Ellie Phillips

explains in the foreword to her book (warning: gross-out alert) is to think of your mouth as a fish tank, and the teeth as the stones.

You could floss those stones night and day, but if the water remained dirty, you would be wasting your time. So the Phillips system aims to alter the chemistry of your mouth.

She uses three different mouthwashes in a specific order. If you need reassurance, look at the trial of Listerine Original (one of her favoured products), in which one group flossed daily and the other used Listerine twice daily.

After six months, the Listerine group reduced their plaque by 52pc more than the flossing group, and their gum health improved by 21pc more than the flossers (whose dental health barely differed from those who didn't floss or use mouthwash).

As for the xylitol, well, that is a revelation to me. For instance, mothers who chewed xylitol during pregnancy have children who are 70pc less likely to have tooth decay at the age of five. So this is what I do: use mouthwashes twice a day and pop a couple of xylitol sweets after every meal. It feels decidedly counterintuitive, this eating of something so super-sweet to help your teeth.

So why hasn't any dentist ever mentioned this stuff to me before? First, I ask Nigel Carter, chief executive of the British Dental Health Foundation. He has said xylitol "may be the biggest advance against cavities since fluoride".

"The dental profession is generally slow to adapt to new ideas," he said. "On xylitol, I think it's probably lack of

knowledge. Any dentist should be aware of the effects of xylitol, but as a profession we do get very bogged down in the mechanical removal of plaque."

In Scandinavia, where xylitol was first championed because of the ready access to birch trees, children are regularly given free xylitol sweets in schools and nurseries.

And do they have better teeth?

"Oh yes, they tend to." Next I talk to Aubrey Sheilham, emeritus professor of dental public health at University College London.

"Flossing is almost completely useless, it doesn't stop tooth decay," he says, adding that he has "slides of bacteria waving as the floss goes past."

"It is still useful for stopping gum disease, but you have to be meticulous — it's time-consuming."

On the other hand, he

like so many at the forefront of preventative dentistry, "would advise people to use xylitol. I have some xylitol mints in my desk drawer. If you look at the evidence it is overwhelming that xylitol works. If a child gets it a couple of times a day, they will get less decay."

By the end of the month, I go back to the hygienist. I wait, open-mouthed, for the result. She says that she cannot find a single speck of plaque on my teeth or beneath the gum line, no bleeding, inflammation, nothing.

She dramatically puts down her tools, saying there is simply no point her trying to do anything to such a perfectly clean mouth (this, needless to say, has never happened to me before).

I immediately resolve to stick with the programme, find creative new uses for my packs of floss and, what's more, begin to dole out xylitol sweets to my delighted children after meals.

Oh, and take whatever bunkum my dentist tells me about prevention with a big spoonful of sugar.

AN IRISH DENTIST RESPONDS...

Dentists mainly deal with two diseases in the mouth, dental decay and periodontal (gum) disease. Whereas the effects of xylitol in reducing dental decay are well documented, there isn't a strong body of evidence to show that xylitol reduces the incidence of periodontal disease.

Probably only 10pc of the population use dental floss in some shape or form; and of those, only 10pc use it totally effectively. So, it is only natural that scientists would seek an alternative to flossing in attempting to stem the tide of gum disease.

Although xylitol is a natural product, there is nothing natural about



bombarding the mouth with a daily disinfection with various mouthwashes. Consider the time, money and effort involved in subjecting the mouth to a pre-brush rinse, a brushing of the teeth, followed by a fluoride rinse and the exhaustive chewing of gums for the rest of the day. None of the mouthwashes penetrate down underneath the gum where the real harmful

germs lurk. The best of the mouthwashes stain the teeth, so where does that leave your pearly whites? Well, I suppose, you could follow on with a tooth-whitening rinse. And what about the effect of mouthwash on your taste buds? It alters your taste sensation.

Saliva is a boon to any biologic system and it is in a constant state of self-renewal, it doesn't necessarily need help from xylitol. Look at the economics of the situation. Floss is king. The best people floss eh... because they're worth it.

Periodontist Declan Corcoran has a practice in Donnybrook, Dublin 4

