

University of Groningen

PET Imaging of Mild Traumatic Brain Injury and Whiplash Associated Disorder

Vállez García, David

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Acknowledgments

“An expert is a person who has made all the mistakes that can be made in a very narrow field.” (Niels Bohr)

After six exhausting years, finally my period as PhD student comes to its end in the shape of this thesis. It has been a long road in which I had the opportunity to interact with a lot of people. Some of them have become my family in Groningen, others just a face in my memory. But all of them are part of the story of my PhD, and I would like to take this opportunity to give my thanks to those that have had a biggest impact on me.

First of all, I would like to start expressing my gratitude to Gert Holstege. This thesis, as all the stories, has a beginning. It was 2009 receiving a lecture during my Master at Girona, Spain. Of course, the content of the lecture was related with neuroscience and neuroanatomy. During one of the pauses, I thought that it was a great opportunity to ask an expert about a possible topic for my Master’s thesis. I am still not really sure of what happened that day. The conversation was finished after few minutes and I was still without a topic for the Master thesis. But instead of that I had the offer to do the PhD in The Netherlands... in Groningen. Groningen?! Where is that place? It was a complicated decision to leave everything in Spain and go into the unknown north. But it has been a worthy decision.

I would like to thank the help, support and friendship of all of those that were part of the Center of Uroneurology, my first home in the University Medical Center Groningen (UMCG). Thanks to Gert Holstege, Caroline Beers, Hari Subramanian, Jonathan Beckel, Huynh Kim Hieu, Begoña Ruiz Nuñez, and Daan Pouwels.

During the first years of my PhD I was “between two worlds”. And while this story started in the Center of Uroneurology with Gert Holstege, the other half of me was in the Department of Nuclear Medicine and Molecular Imaging (NGMB). In my first visit to the (UMCG), I had an interview with Rudi Dierckx, my first promotor. It is not necessary to say that without his support nothing of this would have happened. As all of those who know him are aware, he is an extremely busy person. In that sense, I think that most of my meetings with him had happen in the corridors of the department or in quick meetings of less than five minutes, in something that from the outside must seem as a “guerrilla tactic” of hit-and-run. Nevertheless, he had managed to keep an eye on my progress, ready to solve the many obstacles that we had encountered over this period, and because of that I am extremely grateful.

There are so many people involved in the NGMB department that I want to apologize in advance if I forgot to mention the name of someone. I would like to start expressing my thanks to Janine Doorduyn, my daily supervisor.

I am aware now that the last 6 years have been a learning process not only for me as PhD student, but also for her as supervisor. And in that sense, I recognize that I must have been quite a challenge. Not only because I am sure that I have been quite demanding and a bit annoying sometimes (it is a personality trait of which I am aware), but also because we had to deal with many obstacle during this period. I am grateful for her constant support, and to be a reference of what I would like to become in the coming years.

I would like to give also my thanks to Antoon Willemsen for his help with my statistical designs and SPM analysis, and his sharp and accurate comments. To Erik de Vries for his support during the last period on my PhD, and his work “behind the curtains” to keep me longer in the department this last year. Special thanks also to Bram Maas and Rolf Zijlma, the contact guys for everything related with the lab, and to the rest of technicians without whom none of the experiments would have been possible. And thanks to the rest of the NGMB family for their work, which direct or indirectly have helped me to achieve this thesis. Major thanks to Sarita Evers, I am sure that without her the department would have crumbled down several times in the last years.

And I would like to manifest my deepest gratitude to Andreas Otte. His help started as an occasional collaboration in my project, but ended as a fundamental pillar in the development of my thesis and PhD as it is now. Without doubt, I can say that the course of my PhD changed from the moment that Andreas Otte became co-promotor (2012) of this thesis.

Of course, I would like to give my deepest thanks to all my “brothers in arms”. First of all, my recognition to Inês Antunes for the countless times that she helped me over these years. Thanks to Andrea Parente for his vital energy and constant kicks to the English dictionary. To Ewelina Kurtys for her disposition to be the guinea pig with SAMIT toolbox and other statistical methods. To Luis Eduardo Juarez Orozco (a.k.a. Prof. Kruskal) for his companionship in our travel to the deepest and unknown parts of the statistics. To the lovely-wicked Brazilian tandem: Paula Kopschina Feltes and Isadora Lopes Alves, who have given new live to our place of work with their arrival. To Jason Marsouvanidis for his friendship inside and outside the working space. To Heli Savolainen and Anniek Visser for their constant disposition to help me. And to all of the rest of PhD students and post-docs that have been with me in the last years: Ate Boerema, Jurgen Sijbema, Xiaoyun Zhou, Alexandre Shoji, Giuseppe Carlucci, Valentina Di Gialleonardo, Daniele de Paula Faria, Mohammed Khayum, Sheida Mirfeizi, Anna de Bruyn, Shivashankar Khanapur, Shiddesh Hartimath, Soumen Paul, Willem-Jan Kuik, etc.

"Students?" barked the Archchancellor.

"Yes, Master. You know? They're the thinner ones with the pale faces? Because we're a university? They come with the whole thing, like rats"
(*Moving Pictures, Terry Pratchett*)

I have always been involved in the student representative organs, and my period as PhD student was not an exception. During these years I found out that many people tends to forget that a PhD student is not a "cheap worker" but a "student". I would like to manifest my gratitude to the work performed over the years by Diana Koopmans and Evelyn Kupier-Drenth from the research school of Behavioral and Cognitive Neurosciences (BCN). Also, my thanks to all the colleagues that I worked with in the PhD student council: Emi Saliasi, Hande Capulgen, Vladimir Shalgunov, Jonathan Mall, Amarins Heeringa, Stefan Wierda, and to all those that have been, are, and will be part of the different student councils. And my gratitude to all the rest of PhD students related with BCN with whom I shared many moments: Nikolaos Stavrakakis, Bertus Jeronimus, Nynke Groenewold, Kees Mulder, Areg Barsegyan, Ana Isabel Amaral, etc.

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I remember some lectures during my studies in physiotherapy about the definition of "family". It is interesting the variety of definitions that you can find about this concept. But, independently of those definitions, when you are abroad, specially during an intensive and demanding period as the PhD, some of the people that surrounds you became your family. No doubt this feeling is the same for many other international colleagues. In the next lines, I would like to express my thanks to all of those who have become part of my new family in Groningen. I would like to start showing my gratitude to Jose Andrés Frias Morales. He is probably the first persons that Erika and I met after our arrival to Groningen. He has made easier the Spanish-Dutch transition, even when he still struggles with some Dutch peculiarities after all his years leaving in Groningen. Thanks for your constant help and support, you have been a lighthouse in this adventure.

It is funny how acts that you will never do in your own country, but you do now because you are abroad, will change your live... One of those changes came from the assault to another Spanish couple in the mechanic stairs of HEMA store. I feel extremely fortunate to count with you as my friends, and it has been an honor to be witness in your wedding. Oscar Martinez and Teresa Antoja, thanks for allways being there.

Grazie to the Italian reception committee who chaperon me during the

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Needless to say, that I would not be at this point without the support of my parents, Alberto Vállez and Gema García. Thanks for everything that you have done for me during all these years. For your constant support on pursuing my dreams. I recognize that it must have been very difficult for you to have your son far away from home for more than 10 years (first Dax, then Santiago de Compostela, and now Groningen), with only one or two visits per year. But you have always placed my happiness above all, and for that I am immensely grateful. And thanks to my brother Javier Vállez, for showing me how your live can change dramatically when you love your work. I am very proud of you. Big thanks to all the members of my family.

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Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Mónica López. I am very honored to have you as my paranymp, not only because not many PhD students have the chance to have an Assistant Professor as paranymp, but because you are a Wonderful Woman. You are a great example of a hard worker in academia, and an exceptional reference for every researcher (even though I don't want to work as hard as you usually do, jeje). But over all, you are a great friend. Thanks for that.

And last but not least, I want to express here my love for Erika Chorén Iglesias. I do not know how to give you my thanks for all what you have done all over these years. We were in the beginning of our relationship when I told you that I had decided to do the PhD in Groningen, and you took the bold decision to leave everything in Spain and to bet your future in our relationship. With me. You make me feel the most fortunate person in the world. I know that we have faced many difficult periods, and that you have carried the burden of this PhD as much as I did. This PhD was not possible without you, and it is as much yours as it is mine. I will never be able to express my gratitude for your decision to accompany me. I would not be where I am, who I am, without you. I know that any future that awaits us will be memorable, because you are by my side. I love you Eri.