

Q: Congratulations on receiving the EASO New Investigator Award in Basic Science Roman. Did you win this award for a particular study?

A: Thank you very much, I am very honoured indeed! The award is aimed at recognising “new” investigators that are still relatively early in their career but have made significant contributions to the field.

As I have not pursued a specific research topic, but actually studied several aspects of obesity and type 2 diabetes in both rodents and patients, I assume the committee appreciated the range of studies that I have done so far. Indeed, I have studied the effects of a food toxin on beta cell health and the importance of dietary composition during weight loss during my PhD, but more recently I have focussed on the effects of bariatric surgery and weight loss on pancreatic islets in models of type 1 and type 2 diabetes.

Q: How does it feel to be recognised by your peers in this way?

A: That is the greatest thing about it! Of course, I am a physician-scientist, and my main professional motivation is to help patients fight the obesity epidemic. But on a personal level, doing research is competitive and time consuming, so it is really stimulating to find out that others appreciate the work.

Q: What made you decide to specialise in endocrinology, and then later obesity research?

A: I have always been amazed by the delicate balances in the complex human body. That is why I studied medicine and later specialised in internal medicine. Endocrinology is a speciality where you not only have to take into account the specific hormonal balances, but also always have to consider them in the individual patient’s life and profile. I like the fact that we get to know the chronic patients, and that we have to coach them based on the best available evidence of the moment.

Q: You are currently based at the endocrinology department of the University Hospitals Leuven and the department of Chronic Diseases and Metabolism of the KU Leuven in Belgium. What are some of the obesity-related projects you are working on?

A: Together with my mentor, Bart Van der Schueren, and our colleagues – research is a team effort! – we are continuing the work in rodent models to explore the benefits and the side effects of weight loss and especially bariatric surgery. We also have a rolling database to assess the weight loss trajectory of patients in our clinic, so we can look at real-world data regarding metabolic surgery and pharmacotherapy in the treatment of obesity. Finally, I am trying to establish a research track focussed on the central nervous system in obesity, especially the food reward system. Although that is not an easy area, I am convinced that we have to understand the interaction between the body and the obesogenic environment if we want to prevent and tackle obesity in the future.

Q: You have also spent a year outside of Belgium as a post-doctoral researcher at the Cleveland Clinic, supported by scholarships from Fulbright and the Belgian-American Educational Foundation. What projects did you work on in the US?

A: I was indeed lucky to obtain sponsorships to live and work a year in the US. First of all, I have to say, it was an eye-opener to experience living in another country, even though I had visited the USA for conferences and holidays many times before. The differences in the built environment and attitudes regarding food for instance were much bigger than I ever would have guessed.

The inside experience in the world-renowned Cleveland Clinic and the Lerner Research Institute, introduced me to a much more enthusiastic and optimistic work environment than we are used to in our home country.

In the Bariatric and Metabolic Institute, I had the privilege to work with Ali Aminian and Philip Schauer, two experts in the field of bariatric surgery. We worked on the effects of metabolic surgery in auto-immune diabetes, and we looked into the effects of metabolic surgery and NAFLD. I hope we will be able to collaborate further in the future, but at least, I was extremely interested to have been part of their research team and the atmosphere in the institution.

Q: Tell us a bit about your life outside of work. When you're not unravelling the secrets of obesity, how do you relax?

A: Well, as I have family with 3 young children, I try to spend as much time with them as I can. That means trying to be home for family dinner (and reopening the computer thereafter) and enjoying our garden in the weekend if the Belgian weather allows. As soon as our youngest adapts a decent day-night rhythm, I will take up running again, so I might be in shape by the time COVID-restrictions will be over and a crowded city run will be allowed!