

2019 EPNA AWARDEE

Dr. Alberto Parras

Personal Interview

The Excellent Paper in Neuroscience Award (EPNA) initiative was first introduced by NEURON in 2009, in order to support and encourage young scientists in the neuroscience field at the early stage of their career. The winners of the award receive a cash prize, as well as an invitation to present their work as special ERA-Net NEURON Young Investigators speakers in an international conference. A fruitful collaboration with the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies (FENS), gives the awardees an opportunity to present their work at the renowned FENS Forum, which took place virtually this year.



Alberto Parras

The 2019 EPNA awardee is **Alberto Parras**. Dr. Parras is currently a postdoctoral fellow in neuroscience and aging at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, exploring epigenetic reprogramming in the nervous system. The award was given to Dr. Parras for his publication from his PhD studies in the lab of Prof. Jose Lucas in Madrid: 'Autism-like phenotype and risk gene mRNA deadenylation by CPEB4 mis-splicing' published in Nature 2018: 560, p. 441–446 (www.nature.com/articles/s41586-018-0423-5).

Continue reading to learn more about Alberto and his scientific journey.

1. Please tell us briefly about your research interests.

Since I was a child, I have been interested in biomedical research in general. I could not choose a specific field because I have always been attracted to answer any scientific question that was coming to my mind. Actually, I am more focused on “in vivo” projects and ideas that can be applied in translational research.



2. Please tell us about your scientific journey to-date.

I obtained my Ph.D. in July of 2017 at the Center for Molecular Biology in Madrid. I investigated mRNA polyadenylation and translation within the context of neurological diseases and furthermore we developed a novel therapy for Huntington's disease. In November of 2018, I continued my postdoctoral training at the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin where we made a key finding that mRNA polyadenylation is a novel regulatory mechanism of gene expression in temporal lobe epilepsy. From September of 2019, I got a postdoctoral position in the laboratory of Prof. Alejandro Ocampo in the University of Lausanne. This lab is focused on interrogating epigenetic mechanisms of aging across multiple models along with the development of novel anti-aging interventions based on cellular reprogramming. Recently, I originated an independent line of research focused on epigenetic reprogramming in nervous system.

3. What made you choose a career in your field?

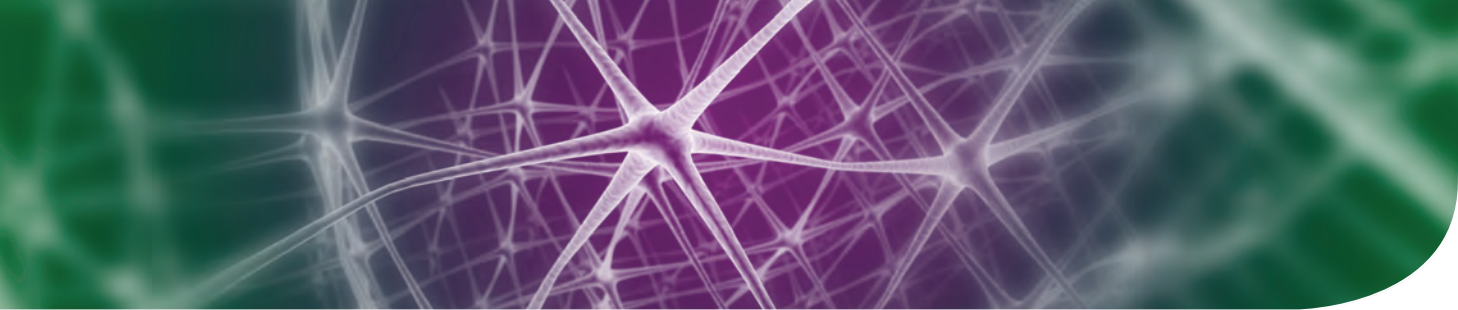
As I mentioned before, I am more interested in the approach than in the field. For that reason, I have always chosen hybrids labs, which work in translational research, combining "in vivo" experiments and bioinformatics analysis.

4. Where do you see your field of research in a few years? What are going to be the major breakthroughs?

Currently, I am studying aging in the context of neurodegenerative disorders. Aging is one of the main risk factors for most human diseases of developed countries but despite decades of research, it is poorly understood. In the last years, funding in aging research has increased drastically and I am sure that in this decade we will see a huge advance in this field. Many new drugs and therapies will be developed, which will have a positive effect on the healthy life span of the society.

5. What were the main challenges you had overcome in your career path and how did you overcome them?

I obtained my PhD in Spain, where the investment in scientific research is not very big and the salaries are relatively low. I was lucky to have worked in Jose Lucas's Lab, one



of the most talented scientists in the country. Particularly, the project for which I was awarded the EPNA was never funded. We had to save money from other projects and to work many extra hours to finish it properly.

6. Had COVID-19 impacted your research, if so how?

Yes, I think like everyone, my research has been adversely impacted by the COVID pandemic this year, specifically “in vivo” projects. However, during this time, I could keep alive and age most of the mice and I also took advantage of my “freed-up” time to write and to publish a couple of papers from my previous postdoc. I also used the time to read a lot and apply for several grants for the following years.

7. What are your goals for the future and where would you like to see yourself 5 years from now?

I got my postdoctoral position in Switzerland 1 year ago. I had always combined my professional research activities with my passion for sports, particularly Triathlon. This country offers me a high quality of live, a very good professional opportunities and the best natural conditions for my sport trainings. For that reasons, I see myself working here for the following years. Actually, last month I applied for a National Grant for senior postdoc researchers, who intend to pursue a scientific and an academic career at a Swiss research institution. This grant would allow me to become scientifically self-reliant at an early stage with an independent research project for 5 years.

8. What advice would you give your younger self or young scientists beginning their research career?

Do not forget that scientific research is our job and in most cases it is something that we really like to do. But, we should always enjoy our work and we should never be obsessed with being successful. We have to be consistent and patient and the success will find us. Moreover, I find my reframe, refocus or reset in sports. By practicing sports, I keep my body and my mind healthy and young. Thus, I would encourage all students to have, additionally to their research, their hobbies and social life in different environments and to feel good about themselves.