



IN THE MAZES OF THE MIND

By Víctor Solano
Photos Milagro Castro
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His more than 25 years of experience in the field make Alberto Vélez Van Meerbeke one of today's best-known and respected researchers in Colombia in attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

As a child, he was told he might grow up to be a lawyer. "They said I argued a lot," recalls Alberto Vélez Van Meerbeke, whose scientific side certainly came out on top. He demonstrated this through his keen interest in plants, animals, biology, and all aspects of anatomy.

While his tastes certainly influenced his decision to study medicine, it was his mother, a woman of indestructible faith and discipline—daughter of the Belgian ambassador in the 30s and 50s,—who showed him, as a voluntary worker at the Lorencita Villegas de Santos Hospital, what it meant to have a vocation to serve others.

In 1974, studying in the final year of his baccalaureate course at the *Lycée Français*, Vélez spent hours chatting with his psychology teacher, enthralled by subjects focusing on the mind.

But how did this Bogota-born lover of tennis and romantic movies become one of the most renowned neuropediatricians in Colombia? The first sign of such a future came as soon as he began to study medicine at the Universidad del Rosario in 1975. He read Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and in the third term devoured neuroscience books, far more than those on the course reading list. Mentored by Drs. Carlos Moreno and Gerardo González in neuroscience, his interest blossomed in areas such as psychiatry and physiology, although he admits to becoming a little disappointed with neurology during his clinical practice weeks due to the difficulties the patients presented.

Vélez did his required year as a rural intern in Duitama (Boyacá), remembering with a smile that when he managed pediatric hospitalization he did all he could and found what he wanted. At the hospital centre, he could grow his experience in neurological treatment, beginning to take greater interest in the world of children.

But his sensitivity meant huge challenges for him. "The child illness situation really hit me hard. There were cases that crushed my soul," he says. Nevertheless, neurosurgeon José Tomás Posada encouraged Vélez to focus on subjects in neuropediatrics.

So, he decided to move to Spain and take a post in child neurology at the La Paz Children's Hospital in the Autonomous University of Madrid. While taking his specialty in Neuropediatrics, he learnt under Prof. Ignacio Pascual-Castroviejo, who is thought of as the "father of neuropediatrics in Spain".

Once back in Colombia, he worked tirelessly from 0700 to 1900 daily in four different institutions. And this was his life for four years until a literal and metaphorical explosion occurred in his life, forcing him into a major rethink.



In 1989, the drug cartel war had state institutions on the rack, menacing society; in one week of September that year, the terrorist wave set off six devices against financial institutions in Bogotá and Cali. One day, shortly after two bombs were thrown at offices in Colmena and the Caja Social de Ahorros savings bank in Chapinero, someone left a suitcase full of explosives in the Granahorrar bank, where it exploded minutes later. Professor Vélez's wife was just three minutes away from being among the victims of that bomb in the Centro 93 shopping mall. It was a distressing and impossible situation for everyone. That same week, even a home-made rocket was fired at the US Embassy. Vélez and his wife were left in no doubt: they regrettably saw that the moment had come to breathe safer air away from Colombia, so they left for France with their recently-born daughter.

Some months later, between 1990 and 1991, Vélez was working at the University Regional Hospital of Strasbourg as a consultant neuropsychiatrist in the Functional Exploration of the Nervous System service. There, he managed the section studying epilepsy cases, read EEGs and video-EEGs while, in addition, working as advisor in neuropsychiatrics at the University Hospital and Hautepierre Hospital.

On his return to his home country, he joined the Colombian Neurological Institute as head of the Child Neurology Department and coordinator of the Epilepsy Clinic, where he led a team treating a high number of patients suffering from this and other pathologies. Later on, he became head of the Department of Rehabilitation and Neurosciences at the National Rehabilitation Centre (Teletón) as part of an agree-

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ment with the Universidad de La Sabana. On a daily basis, Vélez and his team saw around 100 cases as outpatients. It was not until the year 2000 that he arrived at the Universidad del Rosario, then under the deanship of Jaime Pastrana. Vélez took on the post of Director of the Department of Clinical Sciences, and he has since held almost all possible posts within the Faculty: director of Publications, head of the Research Office, chair of the Committee on Ethics in Research of the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, member of the Academic Council of the Faculty of Medicine, director/editor of the journal *Revista Ciencias de la Salud*, full-time professor, and coordinator of the Neuroscience (NEUROS) Research Group. "The only thing I've not done is be dean," he says smiling.

His leadership of NEUROS saw it attain the highest ranking in Colciencias, having diversified from clinical approach to a wider scope including basic science, engineering, technology and rehabilitation, and the creation of both national and international networks.

The mere mention of the Group lights up Vélez's eyes, but so too does talk of his duties running the journal *Revista Ciencias de la Salud*, which he has directed since 2002, producing 17 issues of international influence. He is passionate about both the journal and researching with students. "I love directing research, and trying to open the eyes of students working in it," he declares. Today he teaches postgrad students and works with residents in research, particularly in epilepsy and neurodevelopment issues.

NEUROS is the destination for virgin minds emerging from research seedbeds (from 40 to 60 young people). Between 15 and 20 will work on research projects in a group that has evolved, and that has its own neuroscience laboratory. Vélez dreams of this one day growing into a research centre to include teaching, research, and outreach, also hosting Master's Degrees in Neurosciences. And this is the legacy he hopes to leave.

Vélez is acknowledged today for his contributions to understanding neurofibromatosis, on how to view it from a cognitive perspective. But he is also known for his clinical and research work in areas such as epilepsy, neurodevelopment and learning disorders, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and in the field of epidemiology.

In a time in which, according to Vélez, "medicine has become dehumanized, practically turned into the simple task carried out by a technician looking at an illness," this expert holds his surgery three times a week. "I like to talk to patients, give them an hour,

and curiously this is how I've managed to have more patients because word gets around that they will be listened to." The professor finishes telling me this and decides to take out his mobile phone, showing me a text message from one of his patients, who thanks him for his attention and for restoring his hope.

Thus Vélez divides his time: there is his family, for whom he likes to cook on a regular basis; his research with NEUROS, checking his colleagues' articles for the journal; weekends off cycling, the substitute he found for his love of tennis (which he hasn't practised for some months due to a meniscus injury); and his unmissable weekly bridge evening.

Although close to being able to claim his pension, his personal choice will more than likely see the lean silhouette of Professor Vélez continue to stroll the corridors of the Quinta de Mutis campus as he mentors his student's reading. His voice, meanwhile, will continue to resound in quite a few more conferences, as it has already done in over one hundred such gatherings. ■



ALBERTO VÉLEZ VAN MEERBEKE

SOME OF THE IDEAS LAID OUT BY PROFESSOR ALBERTO VÉLEZ IN DIVERSE EDITORIALS PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL *REVISTA CIENCIAS DE LA SALUD*, WHICH HE HAS EDITED FOR THE PAST 16 YEARS.

"THE DOCTOR-PROFESSOR CAN GIVE TO HIS DISCIPLE THE HUMAN PART OF TREATING THE PATIENT, TEACH ETHICS AND KEEP GOING OVER SOME OF THE ASPECTS OF MEDICAL PRACTICE THAT ARE NOT FOUND EITHER IN BOOKS OR CONTROLLED CLINICAL TRIALS..."

"UNDER THE SITUATIONS OF DISPLACEMENT AFFECTING MANY FAMILIES IN THE COUNTRY, THE CHILDREN BEAR THE BRUNT BECAUSE, APART FROM THE ANXIETY AND FEAR THIS CONDITION CREATES, THEY ARE TAKEN OUT OF THEIR NATURAL HABITATS TO LIVE AMONG OVERCROWDING WITH SLIM CHANCES OF GROWING UP IN A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT, OR AT LEAST IN THE MINIMUM CONDITIONS REQUIRED FOR GOOD DEVELOPMENT."