

# WESTERN NEWS

The University of  
Western Ontario

## IN PROFILE: new faculty - Manuel Montero-Odasso

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By Tina McFadden  
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Geriatrician Manuel Montero-Odasso has mastered five languages and an expertise in assessing aspects of a senior's health by the pace of their walk.

Old-age health revealed by walk

When other kids were playing soccer in his hometown of Buenos Aires, Manuel Montero-Odasso was at the library reading books on physics and chemistry.

Even as a young boy, he knew he wanted to be a doctor.

His parents instilled in him the desire to be a physician, he said. "They never said you have to be a doctor," he said, but his mother had a great admiration for doctors, and his parents encouraged him to study a profession.

Montero-Odasso, started last year as assistant professor of medicine at The University of Western Ontario. He is a geriatrician and academic researcher in the Department of Medicine, and treats patients at Victoria and Parkwood hospitals. He does some lecturing, but most of his teaching of residents and medical students is done in the hospital at his patients' bedside.

Montero-Odasso graduated as a physician from the University of Buenos Aires in 1990. After his residency, he started a consultation team at a Buenos Aires hospital where he realized he wanted to specialize in gerontology, the study of old age and elderly people.

Most of the problems he saw during consultations involved elderly people with hip fractures.

"So I became very interested in hip fractures, problems in old people, falls, balance problems."

He did a fellowship in geriatric medicine and later began researching mobility and falls. He conducted a study with elderly people to measure their gait velocity - the time it takes for a person to walk. He found that slow gait velocity in elderly people could predict other adverse events like hospitalization or falls.

In 2003, after completing his PhD, Montero-Odasso was invited to conduct research at McGill University in Montreal, so he and his wife Stella Nieto moved to Canada.

Geriatrics is a challenging field, Montero-Odasso said, but that's what he likes about it. "It's a real intellectual challenge to treat old people, and then to make a diagnosis is not so easy."

And despite the rigour and discipline required in his job, Montero-Odasso said he still finds an element of play in his work and his research. It connects him back to his childhood when he played with chemistry sets and wrote down all his experiments.

"For me, it's not working," he said. "It's my passion."

In his free time, Montero-Odasso indulges in his other passion - his love of literature. He's an avid novel reader - favourite authors include Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes. He also makes time to play squash and rides his bike to work most days.

In fact, he doesn't own a car. He doesn't like cars because they pollute the earth, he says. He didn't need a car when he lived in Argentina or Montreal, but he admits it's harder to get around London without a car.

It was in Argentina that Montero-Odasso first met Michael Borrie, chair of the division of geriatric medicine at Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry. They met at a pan-American congress in 2003, and then Borrie followed Montero-Odasso's career when he moved to Montreal.

"His passion for research is very invigorating," said Borrie, who now works closely with Montero-Odasso. "He's a very caring, compassionate physician, very concerned about patients."

Another tremendous advantage is his ability to speak five languages, Borrie said. Montero-Odasso speaks Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French and English.

Borrie recalls a time when an Italian woman and two Portuguese women in their 90s were patients at the hospital. None could speak English, but Montero-Odasso was able to communicate with them in their native languages.

"He brings a diversity and energy, which is a richness you get when people come from a different culture and perspective," Borrie said.

And diversity brings broader understanding and tolerance, he said. "We haven't all come out of the same mould."

Manuel Montero-Odasso  
Department: Medicine  
Education: Medical school, University of Buenos Aires; PhD (gerontology),  
University of Buenos Aires  
Birthplace: Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Point of Interest: Awarded Age Plus Prize from Canadian Institutes of Health  
Research Institute of Aging in February 2006 for his article "Gait velocity as a  
single predictor of adverse events in healthy seniors aged 75 years and older"

The writer is a graduate student in Journalism.

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