

## **Morulas Young Researcher Career Spotlight**

After hatching, preimplantation embryos are exposed to the uterine environment, which can sometimes be hostile. Similarly, after finishing their PhD degrees, young researchers are exposed to a different environment, which sometimes can be challenging. The Morulas Young Researcher Career Spotlight is an organized effort to learn from the recent experience of (ex-)Morula members who opted to follow a career in academia or industry after finishing their PhD. In a series of monthly reports written in an interview-like format, we will seek out comments and advice from ex-Morula members and post their answers on our Facebook and Twitter accounts. In this way, younger Morulas will understand the upcoming challenges and difficulties in their future careers.

### **Beatriz Rodriguez-Alonso**

**Please describe your citizenship, institution, and PhD thesis title.**

My name is Beatriz Rodriguez-Alonso. I am from Spain, and I did my PhD thesis, “Studies on embryo-maternal interaction in the oviduct in cattle,” under the supervision of Dr. Dimitrios Rizos (INIA, Madrid, Spain) and Prof. Patrick Lonergan (University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland). Currently, I am a postdoc in Reproductive Genomics at the University of California, San Francisco, in Dr. Aleksandar Rajkovic’s laboratory.



**When did you decide to start a career as a clinician, and when did you decide to move to academia?**

Before finishing my degree in biology, I decided that I wanted to pursue a career within the field of reproduction and infertility. Specifically, I wanted to become a clinical embryologist, a position in which I would be able to work within a laboratory in a clinical setting. I was fortunate to work in an IVF laboratory where we were encouraged to participate in multiple research projects. This, along with my desire to grow within the field and the potential for vertical mobility, triggered my desire to pursue a PhD in reproductive biology.

**What are your suggestions for applying for a PhD?**

My PhD was part of the Rep-Biotech Joint Doctoral Project, a European Network created to train researchers in the field of biology and technology of reproductive health. Rep-Biotech is a Marie-Sklodowska Curie Innovative Training Network funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 Programme. This programme was a great opportunity that allowed me work on my PhD in three laboratories based in two different countries (Ireland and Spain). As part of the program requirements, participants needed to complete multiple courses at top universities in Europe and present their research at international meetings. This comprehensive training led me to acquire not only the PhD, but a set of

critical skills that have been indispensable, even after my graduation. I would 100% suggest that anyone considering doing a PhD apply for this or similar types of grants.

**Would you describe your life during your PhD?**

I started my PhD with both excitement and fear because, as a clinical embryologist, working with cattle for the first time, in an IVF laboratory based in a farm, and collecting ovaries from the slaughterhouse was a huge challenge! To my surprise, I acclimatized quickly, and working with cattle embryos gave me the opportunity to improve my skills and knowledge as an embryologist. I can honestly say that I had a blast during my PhD!

**What have been the most significant changes in your life after your PhD?**

Originally, I pursued a PhD to have more opportunities within the clinical field. However, once I finished my PhD studies, a whole new world was opened to me. At a professional level, my PhD gave me the opportunity to continue my career as either a clinical embryologist or as a researcher. At a personal level, it gave me the opportunity to fulfil a lifelong dream of mine, which was to live in California. After months of establishing contact with the laboratories I was interested in, I accepted a position at the University of California, San Francisco, in a laboratory that specializes in reproductive genetics.

**What are your next steps?**

Even though I enjoy my work as a researcher, after living two years in the exciting microenvironment of San Francisco and the Bay Area, I am considering new avenues within the biotech industry or the start-up world. My passion for reproductive health will always guide my career choices. However, being open minded and exploring different options (clinic, research, or industry) is very appealing to me!

**If you could change something in your academic career, what would it be?**

As hard as it is to believe it, nothing. Even the choices that led me to places in which I was not feeling fulfilled served a purpose in the long term. I like to make my career decisions as if I were a chess player, thinking on what position or skills will help me advance to the next level. It is important to find a balance between keeping your long-term goal and being able to go with the flow and rearrange the plan as you and your circumstances evolve.

**Do you have some suggestions for bachelor's students looking for a PhD or PhD students looking for a postdoc?**

In my experience, key aspects in achieving my goals have been being aware of the location of relevant research, the key leaders in your field, and funding opportunities that apply to your circumstances. If I could give some advice to someone trying to find an exciting opportunity, it would be to have a clear idea of what and where you want to be, and go for it even if there are no open positions advertised. It is amazing how many things can be accomplished by just contacting people and having the right attitude!