

Interview with Roberto Paoletta, a PhD student and fellow of Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA) at the University of Antwerp was diagnosed with MS in 2005.

Roberto was born in Toronto (Canada) the 1st of March 1985, but when he was just a baby, the family moved to Cassino (Italy). He started a bachelor's degree in Telecommunication Engineering at Università degli studi di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale (Italy) in 2005. However, the same year, the 7th of August 2005, while watching tv, he started to see everything doubled. He did immediately both CT and MRI, and the two techniques showed the presence of active MS lesions that led to the diagnosis of RRMS. The MRI also revealed the presence of older lesions, proof of the fact that the disease was already present long ago.

After the diagnosis, going on became really hard. "You start to live with the continuous anxiety that, even if for now you are more or less fine, it's just a matter of time for a worsening", he says. He started immediately a first treatment based on interferon, which he continued until 2012. As a consequence, obtaining the bachelor's degree took more time than expected, especially considering that a second severe attack in 2010 caused a complete loss of sight in the right eye, only partially regained. In 2012, new active lesion, but asymptomatic, always found with the MRI, signed the inefficacy of the therapy and led to a change from interferon to 'Fingolimod'. In 2013, he finally completed his bachelor's degree, and he decided to move back to Canada with his girlfriend, starting several different jobs. In this period, his main hobby became to study and learn about MS. Therefore, after nine months, in 2016, he decided to resume his studies, but in the direction of the neuroimaging, and he won the call for the MAIA, Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree in Medical Imaging and Applications, coordinated by the University of Girona (Spain), and with the University of Bourgogne (France) and the Università degli studi di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale (Italy) as partners. In 2016, the periodic check-up showed the presence of new, but luckily asymptomatic lesions; as a consequence, again a change of the therapy was necessary. This new medication called 'Ocrevus', which was still experimental in 2016 and now seems to be the most effective one on the B lymphocytes. Up to now, no new lesions have been observed.

In 2018, after graduation, he moved to Belgium with his wife, where he started as MSCA fellow and industrial PhD student at Incometrix, focusing on the standardization of brain MRI diffusion parameter maps for multi-centre studies. After all those years spent on studying MS, he managed to make a job out of his hobby. Indeed, during his last year of PhD, Roberto focused his research on developing algorithms, which predict from the lesions' MRI images the damages that the MS patients can develop in the medium/long term. "The only important thing that I have to keep in mind is always to distinguish between 'Roberto the patient' and 'Roberto the researcher', avoiding mixing my clinical history with my own research". In this last year of COVID-19 and quarantines, the situation became, obviously, more complicated with a lot of stress and fear due his therapy of being immunosuppressed. Also, the awareness that the vaccine is less effective on him compared to the healthy population makes it even more difficult, and the only hope to come back to a normal life without mask is the vaccination of all of the population. However, despite everything, he is now starting his last year of PhD, he is happily married and has recently become father of a beautiful baby called Dante. "The only doubt that always come to your mind is: how would I be if I didn't have the disease? You associate everything that happens, like simply forgetting your car keys, to the disease, and you only must learn to live with this thinking, if you want to go on. But hey, for now it has been 16 years that I discovered having MS, and in general I am fine, I am doing a work that I like and I have a baby, so I am happy to continue in this way".