

Celso Arango: The future of psychiatry inevitably depends on primary prevention

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Dr. Celso Arango stands as a preeminent authority in psychiatry, wielding considerable influence through his multifaceted roles. As Director of the Institute of Psychiatry and Mental Health at Hospital General Universitario Gregorio Marañón and Professor of Psychiatry at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, he spearheads Spain's advancements in mental health research and treatment. Dr. Arango's expertise resonates globally, reflected in his visiting professorships at renowned institutions, including the University of California, San Francisco, the University of Maryland, and King's College London. His commitment to international collaboration, evidenced by partnerships with over 100 institutions worldwide, significantly propels the global psychiatric community forward. Dr. Arango's exceptional contributions have garnered prestigious accolades, notably his election as the youngest member of the Royal National Academy of Medicine in Spain and his recent induction into the National Academy of Medicine in the United States. At the core of his research efforts lies a dedicated focus on early-onset psychosis and neurodevelopmental disorders in young individuals, work that not only advances scientific understanding but also offers tangible hope for improved treatment outcomes. Dr. Arango's unique blend of clinical expertise, research acumen, and academic leadership positions him at the vanguard of innovation in mental health care, potentially revolutionizing our approach to understanding and treating psychiatric disorders across the lifespan. In this exclusive Genomic Press Interview, Dr. Arango shares insights on his life and career, offering our readers a glimpse into the mind of one of psychiatry's most influential figures.

Part 1: Celso Arango – Life and Career

Could you give us a glimpse into your personal history, emphasizing the pivotal moments that first kindled your passion for science?

When I was a child, I remember helping my father, who was a psychiatrist, by placing the required stamps on his prescriptions. I also listened to his fascinating and curious stories about clinical cases he attended worldwide. I have always been obsessed with the truth and have never liked people who expect their opinions to be accepted without data to back them up.

We would like to know more about your career trajectory leading up to your most relevant leadership role. What defining moments channeled you toward that leadership responsibility?

I have always been restless and driven by the search for new challenges and opportunities. Although I was born in Palma de Mallorca, I studied medicine in Oviedo, in northern Spain, where my father's family is originally from, as well as in Manchester, in the United Kingdom. After completing my residency in psychiatry, I pursued a fellowship in schizophrenia research at the University of Maryland. There, I met my mentor, Professor William Carpenter, who has guided me ever since.



Figure 1. Celso Arango, MD, PhD, Hospital Gregorio Marañón, UCM, CIBERSAM, Madrid. Spain.

Upon my return to Spain, I began my work with the firm belief that strength lies in unity, modesty, and collaboration. I became the first scientific director of the Spanish Networked Center for Mental Health Research (CIBERSAM), and, together with other outstanding psychiatrists in Spain, such as Eduard Vieta, I helped ensure that Spanish psychiatry collaborated across a network with many other scientific disciplines. I currently run what is likely the largest department of psychiatry in the country, with over 350 staff members.

Please share with us what initially piqued your interest in your favorite research or professional focus area

My research has evolved, likely reflecting my belief that research should be dynamic and informed by its results. I initially focused on schizophrenia





Figure 2. Celso Arango participating in the Lanzarote International Half Marathon on the Island of Lanzarote, Canary Islands, Spain. Amidst the iconic palm trees of the island, Dr. Arango is captured in full stride, flashing a bright smile and a thumbs-up to onlookers. His enthusiastic engagement in this challenging event reflects the energy and determination he brings to his pioneering work in psychiatry. The vibrant island setting provides a striking contrast to Dr. Arango's usual clinical environment, highlighting his ability to balance rigorous professional pursuits with an active lifestyle.

and first psychotic episodes, primarily in child and adolescent populations. I then became interested in secondary prevention of psychosis, followed by research into prodromal stages and risk factors for psychosis. Currently, I am focused on primary prevention of mental disorders, exploring universal, selective, and indicated primary prevention strategies.

What impact do you hope to achieve in your field by focusing on specific research topics?

I have come to understand that there are no specific risk or resilience factors for particular disorders and that the increase in the incidence and prevalence of mental disorders can only be addressed, as in many other areas of medicine, through primary prevention.

Please tell us more about your current scholarly focal points within your chosen field of science

We need to learn to work with basic researchers to understand the mechanisms through which risk factors shape brain function and gene expression, and with many other specialties and disciplines to effectively prevent mental disorders by minimizing risk factors and enhancing resilience. We must collaborate with obstetricians, neonatologists, pediatricians, educators, employers, policymakers, sociologists, and others.

What habits and values did you develop during your academic studies or subsequent postdoctoral experiences that you uphold within your research environment?

I greatly appreciate flexibility, originality, and disruptive thinking that questions widely accepted beliefs. Values such as honesty, humility, and punctuality are always top priorities for me. I love being surrounded by people who know more than I do and having the opportunity to learn something new daily.

At Genomic Press, we prioritize fostering research endeavors based solely on their inherent merit, uninfluenced by geography or the researchers' personal or demographic traits. Are there particular cultural facets within the scientific community that warrant transformative scrutiny, or is there a cause within science that deeply stirs your passions?

Unfortunately, the Spanish system has traditionally been influenced by nepotism and established connections rather than meritocracy. It is an unjust system that prioritizes one's last name and personal connections over individual merit. This system has harmed generations of young talent who have had to emigrate or give up on their dreams.

What do you most enjoy in your capacity as an academic or research leader?

I greatly enjoy teaching psychiatry to fifth-year medical students and watching as young researchers I have trained now lead their investigations.

Outside professional confines, how do you prefer to allocate your leisure moments, or conversely, in what manner would you envision spending these moments given a choice?

I enjoy playing sports, especially running, as it helps me relieve much stress. I also love participating in my children's activities, such as soccer and paddle tennis. We try to take a family trip every year, and I enjoy our summer break in Viveiro, a village in northern Galicia where we have a family home. Time seems to pass much more slowly there.

Part 2: Celso Arango – Selected questions from the Proust Questionnaire¹

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

I do not believe in perfect happiness; its pursuit can only lead to frustration and dissatisfaction.

What is your greatest fear?

I worry that my child's needs, as someone with severe intellectual disabilities, will not be met when I am no longer in this world.

On a broader level, my greatest fear is how populism, post-truth thinking, and extreme, reductionist positions, which even affect psychiatry, have been gaining ground in recent times.

¹In the late nineteenth century, various questionnaires were a popular diversion designed to discover new things about old friends. What is now known as the 35-question Proust Questionnaire became famous after Marcel Proust's answers to these questions were found and published posthumously. Proust answered the questions twice, at ages 14 and 20. In 2003 Proust's handwritten answers were auctioned off for \$130,000. Multiple other historical and contemporary figures have answered the Proust Questionnaire, including among others Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, Fernando Pessoa, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Cézanne, Vladimir Nabokov, Kazuo Ishiguro, Catherine Deneuve, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Gloria Steinem, Pelé, Valentino, Yoko Ono, Elton John, Martin Scorsese, Pedro Almodóvar, Richard Branson, Jimmy Carter, David Chang, Spike Lee, Hugh Jackman, and Zendaya. The Proust Questionnaire is often used to interview celebrities: the idea is that by answering these questions, an individual will reveal his or her true nature. We have condensed the Proust Questionnaire by reducing the number of questions and slightly rewording some. These curated questions provide insights into the individual's inner world, ranging from notions of happiness and fear to aspirations and inspirations.

**Which living person do you most admire?**

On a professional level, my mentor, William Carpenter, has been instrumental, while on a personal level, my wife and children have been my greatest support. Additionally, figures like Ramón y Cajal and Gregorio Marañón inspire me beyond the personal realm.

What is your greatest extravagance?

I am not sure if it is considered an extravagance these days, but I am a big fan of my football team, Atlético de Madrid, and I feel quite upset when they do not play well.

What are you most proud of?

I feel very proud of the recognition I receive from grateful patients for what I have been able to do for them.

What is your greatest regret?

Not having been closer to my father in his last years.

What is the quality you most admire in people?

Intelligence, compassion, and sincerity.

What is the trait you most dislike in people?

Lack of integrity.

What do you consider the most overrated virtue?

The ones that should never be considered virtues: power and money.

What is your favorite occupation (or activity)?

I greatly enjoy my clinical work and the feeling that I am helping my patients and their families. I also truly enjoy promoting philanthropy for child psychiatry, which has given me the opportunity to meet wonderful people like Alicia Koplowitz. I also love singing with my musician friends!

Where would you most like to live?

In Spain. I will always live in Spain even though I may work abroad temporarily.

What is your most treasured possession?

The love of my family and the friendship of my friends.

When and where were you happiest? And why were so happy then?

I was very happy during my university studies, in a time that felt freer from responsibilities and worries, surrounded by people with whom I formed deep friendships that persist to this day.

What is your current state of mind?

More at peace than ever, with new challenges that excite me, and focusing more on what I genuinely believe is worthwhile.

What is your most marked characteristic?

I am quite reliable and try to be fair to those around me.

Among your talents, which one(s) give(s) you a competitive edge?

To grow in the face of adversity and never give up on anything. To be a dreamer who fights fiercely for their dreams.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

To fight against nepotism in my country and strive to ensure that many different people collaborate toward common goals. Additionally, the creation of the specialty of child and adolescent psychiatry in Spain after meeting with nine consecutive health ministers!

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

Probably spending more time with my children when they were young.

What do you most value in your friends?

That they show up when I need them the most.

Who are your favorite writers?

Gabriel García Márquez, Maggie O'Farrell and Philip Roth.

Who are your heroes of fiction?

More than heroes, one of the things I enjoy the most is watching the films of the Marx Brothers.

Who are your heroes in real life?

Volunteers who invest their time in helping those in need, and individuals who leave behind all material possessions to assist those they do not know.

What aphorism or motto best encapsulates your life philosophy?

Surround yourself with people who are better than you.

Celso Arango¹

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