

In memoriam: Álex Urbistondo

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We write these words with heavy hearts after the passing of our dear colleague and friend, Alexander Urbistondo.

The son of a well-known Basque pelota player from Andoain, Alex spent his early years in the United States. He studied medicine at the University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU) and completed his residency at Vall d'Hebrón in Barcelona.

Even back then –true to his roots as a proud Gipuzkoan– he never missed a summer without stopping by the San Sebastián department to say hello and remind everyone he would be back after his residency. He did not need to –the references from his supervisor in Barcelona, Vicente Martínez Ibáñez, spoke volumes. There was no doubt –he was a fantastic addition to any team.

Alex stood out effortlessly. Not just for his height –over 1.90 meters, with a tousled mop of hair that gave him the air of a brilliant, absent-minded professor–, but far more so for his extraordinary humanity. He was, in every sense of the word, a good person. Sharp-minded, kind, thoughtful, discreet, funny, and a consummate professional –these are just some of the qualities that come to mind. His way of engaging with his young patients and their families came from a place of genuine concern for their emotional and physical well-being. This was clear to anyone who worked alongside him.

Alex met the love of his life, Yesika, during his residency. At the time, she still lived in San Sebastián. Every chance he got, he would hop on a bus to spend the weekend with her. Of course, we never missed an opportunity to tease him about the exhausted look on his face on the Monday –which he took with his usual good humor. Later, she moved to Barcelona to train as a midwife, and we quickly understood why Alex had fallen for her –she was a smart, brave, and warm woman. We were lucky to become her friends, too.



Together we faced the terrifying days of Alex's initial diagnosis –and later, the joy of hearing he had entered full remission.

After finishing his residency, Alex pursued further training with a fellowship at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, where his talents stood out again. He developed a strong bond with Dr. Edward Kiely during his time there. When it came time to decide on his professional future, despite Vall d'Hebrón's eagerness to hire him, Alex made his priorities clear: time with family was precious. He chose to return to San Sebastián.

From the moment he arrived, he brought everything he had learned in those two world-class hospitals to his work. In 2017, at just 35, he took on the role of Head of Department following his predecessor's retirement. Incredibly organized and methodical, Alex always led by example –calmly and confidently. Under his leadership, the team

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welcomed new professionals, expanded its services, and built stronger collaborations both within the hospital and with other pediatric surgery departments.

Back in San Sebastián, Alex reconnected with old university friends and spent more time with his close friends. But most importantly, he married his beloved Yesika and became a devoted father to Endika and Paul, whom he adored with all his heart.

An enthusiastic food lover, he belonged to a gastronomic society and enjoyed cooking with friends. He loved music and attending festivals. He was also an accomplished tennis player –and those who knew him well said he was once a great football goalkeeper. Despite moving back to the Basque Country, he never lost his bond with Barce-

lona, frequently visiting his sister and nephew there, and catching up with old friends from Vall d'Hebrón. Distance never weakened those friendships.

Even when his health declined, he continued working with remarkable dedication. Ever upbeat and with his unique sense of humor, he faced his final chapter with a courage few possess. His early departure leaves a tremendous void in his family and among all who knew him. Those of us who had the privilege to know and work alongside him will always admire his strength. He leaves us not just memories, but a legacy –a standard to carry forward in the work to which he was so devoted.

We will never forget you, Alex. We love you, friend. Rest in peace.