CHAPTER 11

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“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”
- African proverb -

My PhD experience told me that the academic world is full of dilemmas. Often, we have to choose between speed vs. quality, staying safe vs. taking risks, collaboration vs. competition, oneself vs. others, etc. Deciding what has a higher priority at each moment is challenging, I believe, not only to me but to everyone. The last four years were not only an opportunity for me to learn new scientific skills, but also to observe how people in academia deal with these dilemmas. I was fortunate to be part of a highly collaborative environment in Groningen Research Institute of Asthma and COPD (GRIAC) and the U4 Ageing Lung consortium, allowing me to learn good examples from a number of collaborators and colleagues. Many times, I asked myself what I would have done if I were in their shoes; and when it came to my own decisions, I often used the benefit of hindsight to consider whether better choices could have been made. Taken together reflections of my own experiences and examples from others, both to which I agreed and disagreed, I slowly formed a concept of an ‘ideal scientific community’—which can be summarized in the African proverb above. A great scientific community, in my view, is not a world where everyone seeks personal successes but where we all work together to push—as far as possible—the boundaries of human knowledge. It is not about what we have achieved before we die, but how useful the things we leave behind to the next generations.

When I just started my PhD, I always felt that everyone else was more capable and more knowledgeable than I was. To them, I was likely one of the ‘next generations’ mentioned above. In this highly competitive world of academia, a lot of people have sacrificed parts of their valuable time to help me grow. Many did so without expecting anything in return. Here, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has contributed, knowingly or unknowingly, to my achievements today.

The first two persons I would like to thank are my first supervisor, Prof. Irene H. Heijink, and my first co-supervisor, Dr. Corry-Anke Brandsma. Both of you were my daily supervisors throughout the past four years of my PhD. I remembered vividly when you two picked me up at the UMCG main entrance on 16 March 2015, the first day I arrived. I was amazed by how amiable and approachable you were. Throughout my PhD, you had shown me your patience and kindness in multiple occasions. We might not have agreed on every issue, but I never doubted your intention and I knew you always meant well to me—you wanted me to be successful. My favourite meeting with you was my annual review, where you always provided
me helpful feedback on my performance and gave me tangible advice on how to improve myself. Over time, your willingness to listen helped growing our trust and understanding, which were important factors contributing to my positive experiences during this PhD.

Irene, you are a role model in various aspects. As a group leader, you always tried to bring everyone together, listened to our problems and encouraged everyone to work towards solutions together. You paid attention to our group members not only on a professional level but also on a personal level (for instance, you knew I loved stroopwafels and found bitterballen quite ‘special’). Be it a lab meeting or a fun gathering outside work, you were almost always there with us. Regardless of how tight your schedule was, you always tried to be available for those who needed advice and remembered to give credits to those who deserve. You once made my day by passing me a big flower bouquet you received as a thank-you present from the ISCOMS organizer. When I asked if you didn’t like the flowers, you said you did but rather gave them to me since I was the one teaching the students. As a supervisor, you paid attention not only to my research data but also to my development as an independent researcher. Thanks to your previous guidance, I now can accept a journal’s invitation to review a manuscript independently with confidence. Your feedback on my writing was always in detail and, at the same time, triggered me to think deeper or broader. Often, you helped me see connections of the data I did not see. The question you often asked me “what do you think?” greatly helped training my scientific thought process and reminding me that one day I will have to make all decisions by myself. Of course, you did not leave me swimming alone hoping I would magically become independent. Amazingly, there were multiple occasions that you recognized I needed help and offered me your help even before I asked for it. Despite being extremely busy with many deadlines, you still sent me the information about the grant that I did not know of but might be helpful to my postdoctoral plan. The most torturous (yet most fun) moment I shared with you was during our five-hour bike trip in San Francisco. While we were cycling up countless of ‘mountains’ (at least I could not count how many there were) with the rest, you suddenly extended your hand to push me on the back just before I was going to give up. At that moment, I did not know whether to laugh or cry (‘laugh’ as I was happy feeling so touched by your kindness and amazed by your fitness, ‘cry’ as I was sad thinking my life might have been easier if I just got off my bike and walked instead). Looking back, I think this cycling trip is quite similar to my PhD journey: it was tough but fun, and you never left me alone when I needed help most.

Corry-Anke, I could not imagine going through this PhD without your support especially in the first two years and the last few weeks. Most of the times when I had urgent questions, you were the first person I ran to ask for advice. No matter how crazy or silly my questions were, you never once expressed your irritation
and were always willing to provide me guidance. When I made mistakes, you never
pushed me down but instead encouraged me to learn from them and think of how
to avoid repeating them in the future. When I lost self-confidence (whether it was
over an experiment, a presentation, writing, etc.), you often helped me restoring it.
When it came to research planning, you taught me about priorities and focus. You
reassured me that it was okay to take one step at a time and pick quality over quantity.
When it came to writing, you taught me that good scientific articles do not have to
be complicated; in fact, simplicity is often the best. The first manuscript was a huge
challenge for me and I still remembered you spent a great amount of time giving
me detailed suggestions on how to rewrite the discussion. I am glad you said my
writing skills have improved and this thesis did not cause you as much headache.
Occasionally, you have saved me from overthinking and taught me that certain things
might not be as difficult as I thought—all I needed was to change my perspective.
As a PhD student, working regularly with several principal investigators was quite
a challenge and getting advice from multiple directions all at once often left me
befuddled. Thus, when you recognized I was struggling trying to please everybody,
you offered advice that helped me handling the situation more efficiently which I really
appreciate. Stress is common during a PhD study, but I was lucky to have a caring
and understanding supervisor as you showed me that you were there not to judge but
to support. Your care also extended to my future after the PhD. Remembering my
postdoctoral plan, you told me about the lecture you attended at a conference and
advised me to contact the professor who gave that talk, later resulting in my decision
to write grant proposals to join his lab. Apart from work, you sometimes also asked
about my health, my family, or my home country. When I moved to a new house, you
offered me a ride to buy new furniture to prepare for my housewarming. Although I
rarely felt lonely living abroad, your kind actions had warmed my heart.

The next person I would like to thank is Prof. Wim Timens, my second
supervisor. Wim, I felt really fortunate to have you in my PhD promotor team. Your
broad and deep knowledge as a pathologist and your long experience in the field had
resulted in several helpful inputs for my project that I could not get from anywhere
else. During my monthly meeting, you often reminded me not to get lost in small
details but also look at a big picture and make sure our findings were relevant to the
patients. Sometimes it was challenging to handle your critical questions but I never felt
offended or discouraged by them. In contrast, I could feel that those inputs were given
out of your good will and I always had fun thinking of how to best respond to them.
Although you were one of the most senior principal investigators I worked with, both
in terms of experiences and job appointments, I never felt intimidated while talking
with you. I once heard that “a good leader is confident enough to be humble”, and
I think your actions reflected this statement very well. Somehow, you made me feel
comfortable asking you any question, telling you any of my viewpoint (even when
it is different from yours), and knocking at your door without a prior appointment whenever I needed advice. The distance between you and us, PhD students, seemed quite far, yet you had a great understanding of the pressure and difficulties we were going through. With your empathy, I was allowed to focus my time and energy on getting each task done properly instead of wasted them on explaining why certain tasks could not be completed in a short period. By recognizing the difficulties we were facing, you also recognized the efforts we put in to overcome them. This recognition means a lot to us, PhD students, especially during stressful periods.

Next, I would like to thank Dr. Maarten van den Berge, my second co-supervisor. Maarten, you made my PhD journey much more ‘colourful’. Your presence usually made our meetings more fun and more challenging in a way no one else could replace (and I mean it in a good way!). Often, I was baffled by how you seemed lost during our discussion but suddenly pointed out an important issue the rest of us had overlooked. Many questions you asked trained me to communicate more effectively and straight to the point as well as to think more clearly about the rationale of my study or the question I was trying to answer. You taught me that clearer communication is a result of clearer thinking. Furthermore, you were my role model in being practical. While discussing the project plan, you helped me distinguish what really mattered and what did not. I always felt free to be frank with you while discussing any issue as I was confident that you were objective and open-minded and thus not easily offended. This was significant in my view as it saved us time (a precious resource) and freed me from unnecessary worries over our communication. In the beginning, I hesitated to go to your office to ask questions as you always seemed busy. Seeing me being so apologetic while seeking your advice outside our weekly meetings, you told me something I never forgot: “Hataitip, my [office] door will always be opened for you. Don’t be afraid to come.” When I made a progress that I thought was insignificant, you always encouraged me to see its value and told me that I should be proud of it. Aside from your intellectual input, I also appreciate your humour. Once, I gave you a pack of dried seaweeds from Thailand as I thought it was a ‘healthier’ choice than the sweets I gave to others; you told me how much you appreciated it and that you would “never forget how it tastes”. My assumption is that there is a negative correlation between delicious food and healthy ones (the better the food tastes, the less healthy it is), so I hope the taste of the seaweeds represented how much I cared about your health.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my PhD thesis assessment committee, Prof. Ken Bracke, Prof. Gerard H. Koppelman, and Prof. Anke van den Berg, for their careful evaluation and approval of my thesis. Ken, thank you for always being so kind to me whenever we met. Initially, I was a bit nervous to visit your lab at Ghent University Hospital alone during my first year, but your warm hospitality and your kind support helped making that nervous feeling gone in a short
time. Despite the negative results of our analyses, I learned a lot from that ten days in Ghent and it was one of the most memorable experiences I had during this PhD. **Gerard,** your presence at GRIAC meetings were always helpful to us, PhD students. Your lecture on Systems Biology was eye-opening and easy to follow. Your questions during scientific discussion trained us to think critically and look at our research from different perspectives. Your advice on research careers and related skills (e.g. writing, presentation, etc.) helped us developed as a professional scientist. Thank you for always supporting the young generation of GRIAC and encouraging us to be proud of ourselves and keep improving. **Anke,** even though I was not working under your supervision, you were always willing to share your knowledge and experiences with me whenever I went to seek your advice. Your expertise in microRNA studies and your critical input during my presentation at our department meeting were very helpful for my PhD research. Your kindness extended to students outside your group, which I appreciate very much in the past four years.

The next person I would like to thank is **Dr. Alen Faiz.** Alen, I cannot thank you enough for your help, particularly during my first and second years. I started this PhD with nearly zero knowledge in R and microarray data analysis. You spent a great amount of time teaching me the basics of bioinformatics analyses and how to use R as well as other open source tools. Your enthusiasm in science was remarkable and you were a rare example of a scientist who could bridge both computational and experimental research together. When I faced difficult technical problems in the lab, you were often the one who helped me figure out the solution. When hearing I had a tough meeting at which you were not present, you came to my office specially to give me encouragement and support. Not only at UMCG, but you were also helpful to me outside work. After going out with the EXPIRE lab members late at night (I was still new to Groningen at that time), you cycled with me till I almost reached home to ensure I did not get lost along the way. Last summer, you taught me how to canoe at Paterswoldsemeer (that was the second time I rowed a boat in my life). After getting hit accidentally(?) by your paddle a few times, my rowing skill had improved significantly. I also remembered you were very good at mud walking. When I fell on the mud during our mud walk, you kindly came to support me to get up (though only after laughing with the rest for a few seconds). I cannot help but feel amazed by your various skills both in science and recreational activities. I think that was impressive and made it fun to have you as a colleague and a friend.

Next, I would like to thank **Dr. Machteld N Hylkema.** Although you were not my direct supervisor, you always tried to be at every monthly meeting to support me and give input on my project progress. You were also very supportive and very approachable outside the meetings. Whenever I had questions, you never hesitated to give me advice. When I had a request, you always responded positively. Throughout the past four years, I very appreciate your encouragement and generosity. Once,
during our meeting where we discussed the challenges I was facing, you told me something I would never forget: “we want to help you, but you must give us the opportunity”. This statement had woken me up. Suddenly, I understood that there might be many people who were willing to help us but did not have the chance to do so because we never told them about our problems. Thus, I must not keep waiting passively; but instead learn to ‘open the door’, allowing others to help. Apart from getting a PhD, another dream I had while staying in the Netherlands was to go sailing for the first time in my life and you helped making it come true. Thank you for offering me a chance to go sailing on your boat. I am also thankful for Jan’s kindness while showing me how to sail and sharing with me his knowledge and experiences on sailing.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof. Dirkje S. Postma. Although I only had a chance to work with you during my first year before you retired, it was an invaluable experience. My impression is that you are very critical and strict, yet very warm-hearted and compassionate at the same time—a rare balance that very few supervisors managed to find. It was always helpful to have you joined my monthly project meeting. Somehow, you could give very critical comments without causing the other party to feel pain. In contrast, your presence made the meeting more fun and livelier. After your retirement, I always felt delighted whenever we met again and you always greeted me with a broad, warm smile. To me, you are an inspiration and a role model. I wish you healthy and happy days ahead and hope I will still get to meet you again somewhere in the world after my PhD.

I would like to thank Prof. Reinoud Gosens. At first, I hesitated to approach you as you were not my direct supervisor and you often seemed very busy. Later, I realized that you were very approachable and willing to help despite your tight schedule. Whenever I asked for help, you always responded positively. If you could not help directly, you would ask someone in your group to help me out without hesitation. Your support meant a lot to my PhD project, especially concerning cell culture experiments. Besides, your feedback on my first manuscript helped me interpret the data in a way I never thought of, resulting in significant improvement of the manuscript. I also appreciate your advice concerning the careers after PhD and your general support to GRIAC members, especially the PhD students.

Next, I would like to thank all collaborators and members of the U4 Ageing Lung consortium. Prof. Guy Brusselle, thank you for setting aside your precious time to discuss my research plan and data during my visit at your research group at Ghent University Hospital four years ago. As I went there alone without any supervisor or colleague from Groningen, your support meant a lot to me. I also appreciate your positive encouragement whenever I gave a presentation at the U4 meetings. It was always motivating to observe your remarkable passion for science and your enthusiasm to initiate or maintain fruitful collaborations among our universities. In the future, I hope I would become a scientist who is able to keep bringing positive impacts to the
organization or community like how you have been doing. **Prof. Tania Maes**, thank you for your warm hospitality when I visited your lab in Ghent and your kind advice during the U4 meetings. Your inputs on my project were valuable and helped me see my data from a different perspective. Whenever we met, you were always willing to share your insight which helped broadening my knowledge especially on microRNAs and asthma. **Dr. Leen Seys** and **Francisco Avila Cobos**, thank you so much for your help in preparing the dataset and running the analyses on microarray data during my 10-day visit at your institute. I also enjoyed fun moments we spent together on a rainy day in Ghent city. **Dr. Muriel Lizé** and **Dr. Merit Wildung**, thank you for your hard work on our joint manuscript focusing on miR-34/449 family. I learned a lot from our collaboration, and it was a pleasure to work with you both. **Dr. Lies Lahousse**, I always appreciate your kind treatment whenever we met and greatly admire your enthusiasm to do research and to support the collaborations among the U4 members. **Prof. Marike Boezen**, I heard getting the university’s funding for this PhD position was a long journey and believe this achievement was largely attributed to your effort. I am grateful for your hard work which opened up an opportunity for me to pursue a PhD here in Groningen. I also appreciate your advice and humour during our long rides to Schiphol airport or to the U4 meetings overseas. Finally, I would also like to thank the rest of the **U4 Ageing Lung consortium members** for all the lively conversations we had during our annual meetings and all collaborations happening throughout the past years.

**Jacobien Noordhoek**, I could not finish this PhD without thanking you for all your help and advice. I started working in the lab with little experience; you patiently taught me air-liquid interface culture and several technical tips that I was not aware of. You were a great example of how a researcher should plan and conduct experiments. You trained me to think ahead, keep good records, stick to protocols, and be aware of the underlying reasons why we do something in a particular way. I also appreciate your good will and fair treatment towards everyone in the group and cannot imagine how our labs will be like without your contribution.

**Marjan Reinders-Luinege**, thank you for your help especially towards the end of my PhD research. It would be hard for me to complete my thesis in time without your help in the IHC staining on transwell inserts. Despite the challenges and sometimes negative results we faced, you did not give up but continued trying to make it work. I really appreciate your time, your effort, as well as your smile and laugh, especially during a very busy period near the end of my last year.

I would also like to thank **Dr. Emmanuel Osei**. Emmanuel, most of our interactions happened online as I started my PhD when you were about to move to Vancouver, but it did not seem to be an obstacle for us. As the focus of our projects are overlapping, I often texted or emailed you to ask for advice and you always responded with enthusiasm and in detail, which I really appreciate. When we had a chance to meet, it was always fun (and funny) to hang out with you. Although it is
unrealistic to expect the road in academia to be a smooth one, I hope you occasionally find roses along the way and never lose your confidence and optimism no matter what challenges you encounter in the future.

Next, I would like to thank Dr. Ilse M. Boudewijn. Ilse, it was a pleasant experience to work with you even just for a short time. You were very organized and very good at communication which made working with you both enjoyable and efficient. To my impression, you are one of the most ideal co-workers one could wish for.

Marijn Berg, we got to collaborate scientifically near the end of my PhD when you helped me with the analysis on the single-cell datasets, which I really appreciate. Before that, however, I am also thankful for your tips when I encountered problems about R. Besides work, I very much enjoyed having you as a companion during many fun activities, e.g. mud walk, canoeing, and most often, playing Go.

Next, I am thankful for Prof. Peter J. Sterk, Prof. Pieter S Hiemstra, Prof. Avrum Spira, Dr Michele A. Grimbaldeston, Gaik W. Tew, and Dr. Nick H. T. ten Hacken for your contribution to my manuscripts, both directly and indirectly, as well as your kind and helpful feedback on my drafts before the submission.

I would also like to thank Prof. Janette Burgess and Dr. Martijn Nawijn in the EXPIRE group. Janette, I am grateful for your advice not only concerning my research but also my future career, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. I also remembered you spent a long time giving me feedback on how to write a good CV, which was eye-opening to me. When there was a review manuscript relevant to my research, you gave me an opportunity to critically review it and provided me constructive feedback afterwards. Admirably, I feel that you treat other PhD students as kindly as your own supervisees, and I know of some other PhD students who feel this way as well. Martijn, although you were not directly involved in my project, you had always been giving me helpful feedback both during and outside the meetings, which helped sharpening my critical thinking and broadening my perspectives. Despite your limited time and even without a prior appointment, you welcomed my questions and provided help, e.g. allow me to use your datasets, without hesitation. As a scientist and a supervisor, I very much admire your broad-mindedness, objectivity, and creativity, which were shown through your lectures, scientific discussion, as well as your treatment to students.

I am also thankful for other colleagues in the EXPIRE group. Marlies Ketelaar, you are an amazing friend and colleague. Your hard work and kindness are unparalleled (seriously). At work, you often asked good questions, gave helpful suggestions, and were always willing to do others a favour. Outside work, you introduced me to many fun activities I had never done before. You will be one of the people I miss the most after leaving the Netherlands. Dennis Kruk, I always enjoyed our conversations no matter on which topics. I was amazed by your broad
knowledge which was likely a result of your high curiosity in science and the world. Often, the ideas you expressed challenged my traditional thoughts, which I found useful for developing my understanding about myself and others. I wish you the best for finishing up your PhD this year and hope you will find a happy path to continue your journey afterwards. **Mirjam Roffel**, it was impressive to see how you could get along well with anyone from any research group, and I too enjoyed talking, working, and hanging out with you. In the lab, you were a very helpful and well-organized colleague. Outside work, you were a fun and kind friend. I hope you will enjoy your two-year stay in Belgium and let us meet again in Thailand or Singapore someday. **Marnix Jonker**, thanks for taking care of my experiments when I was not around and for always ensuring me it was okay to ask for help. **Djoke van Gosliga**, thanks for always being helpful to me in the lab, for sharing your insight about local traditions or local festivals, and for giving me ‘lekker’ sugar bread from Friesland. **Marissa Wisman**, thanks for taking care of my cells when I was not around and teaching me Western Blot. You were a very active, fun, and helpful colleague, and I believe having you joined our group had made us better. **Dr. Daan Pouwels**, you were not only a very capable scientist but also a very helpful colleague. Whenever I sent you an email to ask questions, you usually responded quickly with clear answers. I admire your logical thinking and frank opinions whenever we discussed science; however, I still do not understand why you like boiled potatoes so much. **Virinchi Kuchibhotla**, thanks for all the (philosophical) conversations we had when you were in the Netherlands and for allowing me to be reminded of how wonderful ‘Life of Pi’ is. On a side note, I look forward to the day you change your view about relationship and marriage! **Qing Chen**, I always had fun going out with you and I am glad we decided to go to Santorini together. Do not be too sad that many of us are leaving; changes in our life look scary at first but they allow new positive things to happen to us if we keep our eyes open. **Harold de Bruin**, I am sure you now enjoy being a daddy although that probably causes you some sleepless nights. Thank you for helping me out in the lab and also for chicken eggs from your home which reminded me of my parents’ farm where I grew up. **Uilke Brouwer**, you will also become a daddy soon and I am sure you will be a wonderful one. I really appreciate your humour and optimism which often helped lighten the (sometimes heavy) atmosphere in the lab. **Sharon Brouwer**, it was fun having you as a colleague. Thanks for offering help and reminding me many times that I could always ask you questions when in doubt of anything (even without Snickers!). I hope someday you will get to try authentic Thai food in Thailand. **Dr. Jian Jiang**, I am glad we got to know each other although it was only for a short time. You reminded me that friendship is not about a complete understanding of what the other had gone through, but it is about trust that the other always means well to us and wishes to see us happy. I hope you always find a peace of mind no matter where you are in the world. **Laura Hesse**, you always gave me a cheerful greeting and asked
how I was doing every time we met. You are one of a few people whom I never felt intimidated or scared to ask for advice whenever I had questions. **Kirsten Muizer**, we got to hang out together a lot despite a short period you joined our group. You were fun, kind, and brave. I hope you will soon discover the path that best fits with your dreams and values. **To all current and previous members of the EXPIRE group**, thanks for always answering my questions in the labs (or offices) and for all the fun times we spent together outside work. You guys had introduced me to another world I had not experienced back in Thailand and you guys played a significant role in making the last four years one of the most memorable periods of my life.

Likewise, I would like to thank my colleagues in the Lung Pathology group. **Wierd Kooistra**, thank you for always helping me out in the labs especially when it came to cell culture and PCR. Whenever I had questions, you were always willing to give me advice and you did so as quick as possible. I also enjoyed the times when we shared our experiences and exchanged our opinions about science and life in general. **Roy Woldhuis**, although you were not a talkative person, you were always responsive when someone asked for help. Impressively, no matter what situation you were in, you always appeared to be calm as if everything was never out of your control. I wish you the best for finishing up your PhD next year and I believe you have a bright future waiting ahead.

**Khosbayar Lkhagvadorj** and **Zhijun Zeng**, you guys were always sincere and polite. I enjoyed the past few years that we shared the same office and appreciate your suggestions whenever I asked for your opinion on my work or sought your advice in troubleshooting some computer’s problems. I wish you a lot of strength and positive data to finish up your PhD within your planned timeframe. **Dr. Sabine Bartel**, it was only a short while that you joined our group and office, but you had already been very helpful to me. Thank you for sharing with me your knowledge and frank perspectives both when it came to issues about my research and my future career. **Minghui Li**, your PhD journey just started not long ago and I am sure there are many challenges waiting ahead. One advice from others that I would like to pass to you is “do not be afraid to ask for help”. Besides, don’t forget to go out of your comfort zone whenever you can; I am sure it will pay off in a long run.

I would like to express my special thanks to **Jennie Ong** and **Roderick de Hilster** for agreeing to become paranimfen for my promotion. **Jen**, it might be the fact that we started our PhD approximately at the same time, we both worked on microRNAs, both liked to stay in office until late in the evening, both are more like a listener than a talker, or any other reasons that helped forming our profound friendship. No matter what led us here, I believe this friendship will last a lifetime. If you ever doubt your own value, I hope you will remember that you are a very special person. In the world where most people compete and focus on their own interest, you always put other people’s interest before your own. If everyone has 1/10 of your kindness, this planet would have been a much happier place. But only those
who survive can continue helping others; I hope you will soon manage to find that healthy balance (for instance, by giving yourself a priority more often). No matter where you decide to settle down in the future, I wish you a fulfilling life and a happy family. Roderick, your friendly and outgoing personality made it easy for anyone to be friend with you in a short period of time. You might sometimes be worried that you were too talkative, but in fact, I appreciate all the conversations we had together and never once thought they were wasteful. Often, talking with you helped me reflect on what I had done and what I truly wanted from being a PhD student. I felt that I could share my sincere thoughts with you without any worry. I also very much appreciate the kindness you showed me even when you just recently joined our office. Once, you helped me took my bike to a repair shop when I (thought I) had lost my bike key. You also volunteered to accompany me to search for a location for my promotion party even though you were already quite busy. As you still have a long way to go before finishing your PhD, I wish you enjoy this road and embrace any challenge that appears with strong faith in your own capabilities and purposes.

Next, I would like to thank my previous officemates. Dr. Maaike de Vries, you were of a great help to me when I started this PhD. As I was unfamiliar with the system and the culture of this workplace, you paid attention to how I was doing and offered help when I needed. I also appreciate that you often kindly offered me a ride when we were heading to the same meeting or event, as well as when I moved to a new house. Further, I would like to thank Dr. Karolin Meyer. Karo, I felt a huge change in our office atmosphere when you left, most likely because we often accompanied each other in late evenings especially during my second-third year. Whether it was a conversation about science or life in general, you were a rare partner who could help sharpening and broadening my perception. In my view, you were a very capable, persistent, and considerate person. No matter what had happened in the past and what will happen in the future, I have full faith in your capabilities and your values. Dr. Juan Song, thank you for always giving me advice both when we were still sharing the office and when you had already moved to Belgium. You were always responsive and clear in your answers when I sent you emails. Besides, I also appreciate the RNA samples and experimental data you passed to me which were very helpful for my research. Dr. Nato Teteloshvili and Dr. Rae Wu, although we were not working in the same research group, you two often gave me good advice and always treated me kindly, allowing me to be able to adapt to this new workplace in a short period of time.

I would also like to thank my hard-working students who did master’s internships with me, Joy van Broekhuizen and Yovita Ariela. I appreciate your diligence, your perseverance, and your willingness to learn. No matter which career you choose after finishing your study, I wish you a great success and happiness in whatever you are doing.
Next, I would like to thank **Prof. Barbro Melgert**. Your inputs during our research meetings, both when I and other students presented, were always helpful and often triggered me to think from a different perspective. In my view, you were a passionate and creative supervisor who was willing to think out of the box, and you were very supportive of all students. In addition, I would also like to thank **all participants of the Lung Pathology meeting** (10:30 AM Monday) for your questions and feedback during our discussion. I would like to specially mention **Laura Florez-Sampedro**, with whom I co-authored one of the manuscripts. Through your presentations and involvement in the discussion, I could sense your passion for science and your hard work which I admire very much. I wish you, as well as other group members who are doing PhD, a lot of joy and success finishing up your theses.

I would like to thank all GRIAC principal investigators for your kind advice and feedback that helped grooming the young generations of our institute. In particular, I would like to express my gratitude to **Dr. Judith Vonk** for your precious advice concerning statistical analyses of my experimental data as well as the name lists of current GRIAC members and collaborators. Furthermore, I would also like to thank **Dr. Anita Spanjer** for providing me your insight on mucin study in air-liquid interface culture as well as your experimental data and RNA samples that were helpful for the start of my research, thank **Dr. Loes Kistemaker** for your valuable advice and support for my air-liquid interface culture, and thank **Xinhui Wu, Mariska van den Berg** and **Pien Goldsteen** for your warm friendship and the fun times we spent together in Berlin. I would also like thank **Dr. Corneel Vermeulen** specially for your help with the deposition of the RNA-sequencing dataset that was required for my manuscript. Lastly, I would like to thank **all GRIAC PhD students**, whose names I could not mention all, for your active participation in our regular meetings and your feedback that helped improving my presentations, my posters, and my abstracts.

I would like to thank my neighbours at **Pathology**, particularly **Dr. Joost Kluiver** who was always willing to give me advice whenever I asked for your insight. Thanks, **Dr. Lydia Visser, Marianne van der Bulthuis-Horst, Bea Rutgers**, and **all other staff members** working in Pathology labs, for your general support and kind advice on any unknown I encountered. Thanks, **Reeny Razak, Mathilde de Jong, Melanie Winkle, Yuan Ye, Fubiao Nui, Myra Langendonk, Jiacong Wei**, and all the MicroRNA group members, for your kindness during work and fun evenings we occasionally spent together. I would also like to thank our secretaries, **Annet Bouman-van der Jagt, Marijke Grimberg, Ellen Kuijpers**, and **Janine Boxem**, for all your kind assistance with administrative tasks which made my life at UMCG much easier.

Likewise, I would like to thank my neighbours at **Medical Biology**, including PhD students, technicians, and all other staff members for your friendliness and fun moments we spent together in the coffee room or during the lab days. I would
like to express my special thanks to Martin Beukema for many interesting (and occasionally humourous) conversations as well as the canoeing trip in Giethoorn, to Dandan Wu and Chengcheng Ren for a very nice home-cooked Chinese meal and your sincere friendship, to Pochanart Kanjan for the lovely times we spent talking about our home country, and to Désirée Goubert, Susanne Phi, Marloes Sol, Renate Akkerman, as well as other MB colleagues for your warm greetings whenever we met at the corridor.

Then I would like to express my special thanks to Dr. Emine Cilek. Emine, you were here as a visiting PhD student and it was incredible how we became friends in just a short period of time. I still remembered the first time we met—while we were doing a DNA lab cleaning. After that, we started to realize that we shared many common interests (e.g. fictions, societal issues, humanities, etc.) and felt like we spoke the same language (even though Thai and Turkish are very distinct from each other). You are a very good listener and a compassionate friend. I hope this world will treat you as kindly as how you treat others.

I could not end this section without mentioning all the research funds that contributed to this thesis. I am thankful for the University of Groningen, Stichting Astma Bestrijding (SAB), and de Cock foundation for funding my PhD research at UMCG. I am thankful for the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) for funding my Short-Term Scientific Project at Ghent University Hospital. Importantly, I am also thankful for patients and general public who care to support medical research in any way you are able to, which reminds us—researchers—to do our best to deliver outcomes that are meaningful to your lives.

I would also like to thank the Royal Government of Thailand for its full scholarships under the Development and Promotion of Science and Technology Talents (DPST) Project, which supported my bachelor’s study in Thailand and my master’s study in the UK. This earlier education led me to where I am today. I am also thankful for the opportunity to join the Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (UGRAD)—supported by the US Department of State and partly facilitated by Fulbright Thailand—which allowed me to study abroad (in this case, in the USA) for the first time, as an exchange student. It was an eye-opening experience and a big stepping stone that helped introduce me to the international scientific community later on.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family members and my fiancé for your support and patience while waiting for me to return home. During the past five years, we met each other less than five times. I always felt that it was tougher for you than it was for me. Mom, it was a pity I could only spend my first 13 years with you before you left this world, but I am very grateful for the love and effort you put in to take care of me during the most vulnerable period of my life. When you were ill and I was a teenager, I did not know how important it was to show you my
gratitude. Thus, I dedicated this thesis to you, hoping to make up for my mistake that I regret till today. Dad, thank you for taking the best care of me when mom was no longer around regardless of how exhausted you were. You might not be the best man on earth, but you have been giving me the best of everything you had. Without you, I would not have been where I am today. To my step-mom, my brothers, my step-brother and step-sister, thank you for taking care of each other all these times when I was living more than 12 hours away from home by plane. Your well-being was extremely important to me as it allowed me to be able to focus on finishing my PhD without too much worry. Soon, I will go back to be near you all again.

It took me only four years to complete this PhD thesis, but it took more than 20 years before I started it. Any achievement I made today is a result of several people’s effort, directly or indirectly. It may now look like a happy ending, but I know this is merely the beginning of the next episode of life. I will continue improving myself, so that I will be able to make a difference to the lives of others, just like how you all were able to make a difference to my life.

Hataitip Tasena