



Dr. Maria T. Abreu Chosen to Lead American Gastroenterological Association in 2024

Maria T. Abreu, M.D., a renowned gastroenterologist at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, has been selected as vice president of the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA).



Maria T. Abreu,
M.D.

Dr. Abreu is in line to be president-elect in 2023, then president of the 16,000-member AGA in '24.

“I have grown up in the AGA and participated in almost every aspect of the organization,” said Dr. Abreu, professor of medicine and professor of microbiology and immunology, and



director of the University of Miami Health System Crohn's & Colitis Center.

Dr. Abreu's first role at AGA was on the research committee in the mid-1990s, while she was a GI fellow at UCLA. That was when Dr. Abreu said she fell in love with the global association.

"I was doing research at the time and was amazed, as a little kid in that world, that I got to rub shoulders with all the superstars in the specialty. I remember how welcoming they were, how intelligent they were, and how I got to witness firsthand how research is valued in the AGA," she said.

Being the trusted voice for everyone—from basic scientists to clinicians in practice—is what makes the AGA stand out, according to Dr. Abreu. AGA, for example, publishes *Gastroenterology*, the premier journal in the specialty.

"The American Gastroenterological Association focuses on GI clinicians taking care of their patients, but also strives to move the field forward with new knowledge--whether that is through the Association's funding of grants or through lobbying efforts to make sure that there is adequate funding from the NIH, VA, Department of Defense... This is important because GI problems are notoriously underfunded compared to other diseases like diabetes," she said. "I think that one of the things I bring to the vice presidency and ultimately the presidency is that I am both a practicing gastroenterologist, specializing in inflammatory bowel disease, as well as a researcher who does basic science and translational science. This allows me to understand what we need to make better."

Dr. Abreu and Miller School colleagues have conducted studies



on what causes Crohn's and Colitis. She has studied South Florida immigrants and Latin Americans with inflammatory bowel disease, to understand how patients are affected genetically, socially and culturally. As a result, the Miller School is home to the largest database of Hispanic patients with inflammatory bowel disease in the U.S.

Dr. Abreu, who is the fifth female vice president and first Latina to be in line to lead the 125-year-old AGA, also understands the importance of diversity in the specialty, having chaired the organization's Diversity Committee. She has also served as the former chair of the AGA Institute Council, which plans AGA's programming for Digestive Disease Week (DDW), an iconic weeklong meeting attracting some 14,000 attendees annually.

"As chair of the Diversity Committee several years ago, I began a program to engage what is a large contingent of Latin American gastroenterologists that come en masse every year to Digestive Diseases Week. Although all of them understand and can speak English, I can assure you that they prefer to hear things in their native language. So, we began 'Lo Mejor' de DDW (The Best of DDW), a session that offers highlights of DDW in Spanish for our Spanish speaking clinicians," Dr. Abreu said. "At first, we did not know whether anyone would show up. But they did and it was standing room only. I have since been very involved in leading our GI Society in terms of increasing the pipeline of Black and Hispanic physicians."

That includes increasing mentorships so that people of all races and ethnicities can get into gastroenterology, which is one of the most competitive fields for entry. Dr. Abreu makes sure not to overlook exceptional people of all races and



ethnicities to speak at DDW and other meetings, so they can be role models for the next generation of gastroenterologists.

Dr. Abreu also has served on many AGA committees, including the nominating committee, public affairs and advocacy committee, and the committee for under-represented minorities.

The AGA's election as VP and having a Miller School faculty member leading a global GI organization reflects on the quality of the Miller School, according to Dr. Abreu. Dr. Abreu herself was awarded the prestigious Sherman Prize in 2019 for outstanding achievements in the fight to overcome Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

"To a large extent, it is the support of my colleagues that allows me to be able to participate actively in these organizations. I want to shine a light on the good things we do here at the Miller School. We are a prominent medical school with a sophisticated GI and hepatology division. But we also have very large groups of private practice gastroenterologists, and I think about all these people when I'm wearing my AGA hat," she said. "This is a proud moment for all of us."

Dr. Abreu will accept the nomination for AGA VP in May at the Digestive Disease Week 2022 in San Diego.

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