



# Dr. Meredith Holcomb is First Woman and First Audiologist to Chair American Cochlear Implant Alliance

Miller School of Medicine audiologist Meredith A. Holcomb, AuD, CCC-A, is the new chair of the American Cochlear Implant Alliance (ACIA).



Dr. Meredith Holcomb, top left, and Dr. Fred Telischi, second from right in front, with the American Cochlear Implant Alliance board of directors.



Dr. Holcomb is the first woman and first audiologist to chair the national organization made up of clinicians, scientists, educators, consumer advocates and industry representatives. The not-for-profit ACIA is charged with improving access to cochlear implants, fueling research and increasing awareness and advocacy about these devices that help restore hearing loss.

“One of my biggest drivers for taking on a leadership position in an organization of this size is that audiologists need to have a voice when it comes to providing cochlear implant care for patients as we are on the front line every day with the patients,” said Dr. Holcomb, who directs the UHealth Ear Institute Cochlear Implant Program and is an assistant professor of otolaryngology at the Miller School of Medicine.

“The best voice we can have is to be actively involved with an organization that closely aligns with cochlear implant surgeons, speech-language pathologists, psychologists and educators. It shows we can work together as a team and be as instrumental in facilitating positive change as the surgeons from a leadership standpoint.”

Being the first woman to lead ACIA also is an important step, she said.

Otology services remain a male-dominated profession, while audiology has a high representation of females, according to Dr. Holcomb. “It’s important that women have a strong voice in the way the organization is moving in terms of outreach and awareness and in the future of the ACIA, seeing as how women make up the majority of the membership.”

University of Miami faculty have long been active in ACIA,



which officially formed in 2011. The Miller School is among the ACIA's more than 100 organizational members, with about 20 cochlear implant experts from the UM Department of Otolaryngology as part of the Alliance. UHealth hosted and chaired the 16<sup>th</sup> ACIA symposium conference in 2019. Dr. Holcomb will make her debut as ACIA's chair at the 2020 conference in Orlando in March, which is hosted by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. This is even more meaningful to Dr. Holcomb as she graduated in the first class of the audiology doctoral graduate program at UNC.

Dr. Holcomb said the ACIA's approximately 1,500 members are focused on increasing access to cochlear implants.

"One of the areas that we're particularly interested in right now is veterans' access through the VA system and how we can improve that," she said. "In general in the U.S. only about 10% of individuals who qualify for a cochlear implant are actually receiving them. In the VA system, it's even less. We see a big need to educate folks who are working with patients -- whether it's internally in the VA system or maybe exploring outreach with other veteran organizations."

Another Alliance goal in the coming year is to ensure all disciplines involved in helping patients with hearing are well educated about cochlear implants. Dr. Holcomb thinks sessions tailored to different disciplines at the annual conference would help to achieve that.

Dr. Holcomb plans to increase opportunities for mentorship among audiologists.

"There's a lack of mentorship within our profession," she said. "The ACIA can be helpful with providing better



mentorship for audiologists so we can have stronger leaders in our field.”

Finally, a big picture goal is to increase awareness among all people struggling with hearing loss and hearing aids. The aim is to make patients powerful advocates for themselves—asking to be referred to a cochlear implant center sooner rather than later.

“We are seeing that patients who finally get to our centers, on average, have been waiting about 10 years since the time they were diagnosed with hearing loss to get the appropriate treatment for it,” Dr. Holcomb said.

Timely care is important especially for older patients. “The hot topic today is dementia with hearing loss,” she said. “There is a strong link with dementia and untreated hearing loss.”

Dr. Holcomb’s nomination as ACIA chair is for a one-year term, but the board can elect to renew her for up to three years. Dr. Holcomb joined the ACI Alliance in 2013 and served as an Alliance State Champion in South Carolina for several years. She was vice chair before being nominated to head the ACI Alliance earlier this year. Dr. Holcomb has served on the Alliance’s Nominations Committee, Continuing Education Committee, and Scientific Program Committee for multiple ACI Alliance conferences.

Dr. Holcomb joined the University of Miami Department of Otolaryngology in June 2019. She received her Doctorate of Audiology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2006 and spent 13 years of her career at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC), where she was an



assistant professor and clinical director of the university's Cochlear Implant Program. Dr. Holcomb was the South Carolina representative for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) Audiology Advisory Council, the immediate past president for the South Carolina Academy of Audiology, and a past president of the South Carolina Association for Deaf and Hard of Hearing A.G. Bell Chapter.

Dr. Holcomb received the 2016 Outstanding Clinician Award through the MUSC Foundation and the 2015 Forty Under 40 Award through the Charleston Business Journal.

Today, she's professionally active in many ways. Dr. Holcomb is on the Audiology Advisory Council for Advanced Bionics, a faculty member for the Institute for Cochlear Implant Training Advanced Audiology Course, and serves as a consultant for the Cochlear Corporation, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and Audiology Online.