LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD TO TERRY ZWOLAN
Remarks at Time of the Award, May 19, 2022

Presented by Donna L. Sorkin, Executive Director, American Cochlear Implant Alliance

Dr. Teresa Zwolan (Terry to most of us) retired last July from the University of Michigan after 31 years as a cochlear implant audiologist. Her contributions to the field are deep and wide. I want to share some of Terry’s own perspectives about her life before discussing her achievements and why the Board of Directors selected her for this recognition.

I asked Terry why she became an audiologist. She had worked as a park leader in high school and struggled to communicate with two deaf boys. It was that experience that led her to know she wanted to help people with hearing loss communicate better. She never felt she should have pursued a different life journey.

Her interest was always to help everyone around her understand what it means to have hearing loss. Years ago, when I went to University of Michigan regularly, Terry told me she wanted her children (Maddy, Sam and Max, who are here today along with husband Tom) to know me so that they could better understand what it means to be deaf and benefit from technology. And, just as importantly, to know me personally.

That pretty epitomizes her philosophy of sharing her own passion with those around her and was the impetus for the extraordinary program she and her team created at University of Michigan. There’s a bit of jargon around now about “person-centered care” in hearing health. Terry has been practicing (and teaching) this for 30 years. The U of M early intervention programs have been a model for how we should support children (and their families) in their hearing loss journey—including the importance of establishing self-advocacy skills at an early age.

When Terry arrived in 1990, the Michigan program had implanted 10 patients. They’ve now performed more than 4,000 CI surgeries. It was the life-changing benefits they were providing that kept her staff focused on what they were doing, striving always to do
better. Many outstanding professionals have left and gone on to share what they learned at Michigan with other programs in other states, continuing the cycle of providing superlative care all over the country. A number of those CI clinicians are here today. Terry further extended her reach by providing formal clinical training programs and through this has reached 200 audiologists.

Terry is one of those rare CI clinicians who are interested in reimbursement. She’s helped all of us better understand this element of CI care. She and her staff worked hard to ensure that Michigan Medicaid understood the CI process and supported families throughout their journey.

Terry was a leader in the CI community’s efforts to expand candidacy criteria when it became clear that children and adults with more residual hearing and those with single-sided deafness, would benefit from cochlear implantation. Dr. Zwolan has authored, and contributed to, nearly 100 peer-reviewed papers on cochlear implantation.

Dr. Zwolan was the founding co-chair of American Cochlear Implant Alliance. Her work with fellow founding co-chair Dr. John Niparko was instrumental in setting ACI Alliance up for success and promoting access to CI over the following decade. Terry shared that starting ACI Alliance was one of the highlights of her career as it brought together multiple professions, all working together—all striving to make ACI Alliance what it is now. Our accomplishments today were fueled by Terry’s vision for what the organization could be.

Terry’s patients at University of Michigan—parents of babies and older adults and everyone in between—speak of her as a kind, empathetic, and extraordinarily skilled audiologist. She leaves behind a highly capable interdisciplinary team that will carry on the work that she began three decades ago.

ACI Alliance members look forward to continuing our work with Terry in her new appointment as Director of Audiology at Hearing First, where she will focus on helping children who are deaf or hard of hearing reach their full potential through listening and
spoken language.