

Fighting for Social Justice in Medicine

Antonia Henry (RBS 1998), MD, MPH, Commander (Select) U.S. Navy

Dr. Antonia Henry's academic, professional, and military awards and attainments are incredibly impressive, diverse, perhaps intimidating, but unquestionably inspiring. She holds a BS with distinction from The University of Michigan, MD and MPH degrees from Harvard University's Medical School and School of Public Health, and sharpshooter ribbons from the United States Navy. She was also a Rhodes Scholar finalist. She completed residency in General Surgery and fellowship training in Colon and Rectal Surgery at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, served as Director of Surgical Services at the NATO Multinational Medical Unit based at the Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan, and she is currently Head of the Combined Endoscopy Center of the Naval Medical Center in San Diego where she holds the military rank of Commander Select. There are still many professional goals and life-filling dreams Antonia plans to pursue in the future.

Like many people who go into health care, Dr. Henry saw medicine as a pathway that combined service to others with subject matter about which she is passionate. During her third-year medical school rotation on surgery, she was drawn to the very tactile way in which surgeons treat disease. However, with greater exposure to the health care system, she came to realize that a technically perfect surgery meant very little if a cancer diagnosis and needed treatment were delayed due to a patient's lack of access to specialty care, inability to afford medications, or a poor therapeutic relationship with providers due to cultural bias and institutionalized racism. In the face of such daunting structural barriers to health equity, she decided to pursue a master's degree in Public Health and focus on health care disparities.



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As for her military experience, Antonia applied for the Health Professions Scholarship Program to pay for the exorbitant costs of medical school tuition. She also thought it would open opportunities to be more involved in global health.

Though that part of her plan did not work out quite as she had hoped, her deployment to Afghanistan (October 2017-April 2018) did offer numerous opportunities to provide health care to US service members and Afghan nationals who were wounded in combat trauma and by suicide bombers. Dr. Henry found her deployment personally and professionally fulfilling because she knows those patients were able to receive far better medical care than if her team had not been there.

Antonia is confident about her extraordinary abilities and enthusiastic about her long-standing mentoring of minority

students aspiring to become medical and health professionals. She is dedicated to fighting for social justice in all fields of medicine. In her 1998 high school essay submission for the Ron Brown Scholar Program, Antonia discussed being cited by white peers as the exception to the stereotype of African American because of her academic endeavors. In the intervening 21 years, she has attained academic and professional achievements so far above and beyond those of most people that the word "stereotype" is irrelevant. However, she says that in so many situations, "I've been the only in the room and that position lends itself to imposter syndrome where, despite my accomplishments, there is always that feeling that I don't belong or that I don't deserve to be at the table. As I've developed my confidence as a surgeon, I've come a long way towards taking my place at the table. I've also realized that the micro-aggressions I confront on a daily basis originate from someone else's racism and the threat they perceive from my presence, talents and success. As a result, I've taken my power back and work to not shrink myself to make others feel comfortable".

Reflecting on being a Ron Brown Scholar, Antonia says it is inspirational to be a member of a group filled with so many people making an impact. Her advice to young RBS interested in medicine is, "The fact is that medicine is a very straightforward path if you meet all of the wickets including passing USMLE exams, matching for residency, passing board exams, etc. It becomes very difficult if you start missing them, so do everything you can to meet them the first time. My advice would be to surround yourself with mentors for various parts of your professional life, tutors for difficult subjects, and peers on the same path for mutual support. There are many diverse ways to fight for social justice in all fields of medicine. Be creative and don't restrict yourself to one specialty or another. Health care disparities affect all body systems!"

Dr. Henry is an avid believer in the power of mentorship. She cites the active involvement of influential adults and supportive peers as key to her own success. Throughout elementary, middle, and high school, her parents sought out mentors for her in the community who helped her to enroll in gifted and talented programs, attend specialized magnet schools and, during high school, participate in summer science programs at colleges and universities in engineering and biomedical research. Her



At left: Dr. Antonia Henry with her parents and sister, Dr. Androni Henry. At right: Dr. Henry holds her daughter Adela.

Wait for it...

It's hard to put into words how it feels to be named a Ron Brown Scholar, but these photos capture the moment when realization turned to elation for the 2019 Finalists as they learned they had all won the scholarship. Meet all 25 new Scholars on Page 6.



Antonia Henry, MD, MPH

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parents introduced her to several Black Obstetricians and Gynecologists in their town who let her shadow them during clinics and surgeries and introduced her to patient care and the highs and lows of “being on call.” During college, Antonia was part of a small and very supportive pre-med program at the University of Michigan. They had their own academic advisor (a Black woman who often served as a mother figure and helped her to survive in the competitive environment). At Harvard, she feels very fortunate to have become friends with a group of women who studied for exams and the USMLE together and provided moral support for each other during the tougher medical rotations. The women’s friendship continued through residency, fellowship, and into the present. They have been bridesmaids and godmothers to each other’s children, and even call each other for consults! Antonia has also enjoyed a mutually supportive relationship with her sister, Dr. Androni Henry, her best friend. Androni is an Emergency Medicine physician and Medical Director of acute care services at a hospital in Pittsburgh. They overlapped at the University of Michigan and supported each other through medical school and residency, often during late night calls commiserating about the unique challenges of being Black and female in medicine, difficult patients, and professional growing pains.

After completing her military service, Dr. Henry would like to work in a medically underserved community and set up a colorectal cancer screening and treatment program to streamline screening procedures to diagnose advanced colorectal polyps and cancers and procure referrals to specialty care based on the results of those procedures. In many underserved communities, access to screening tests, gastroenterologists, surgeons and oncologists is hampered by economic and insurance barriers, lack of specialty trained providers, a patchwork of medical care, and the absence of registries to ensure adherence to surveillance guidelines.

When asked how she will know that she has been successful, Antonia pointed out that type A overachievers in medicine never think they are done. However, in a nutshell, she says it is all about impact for the people we serve. Her hopes are that one day there will be a narrowing in the gap between majority populations and the historically underserved in terms of colorectal cancer diagnoses, stage at diagnosis, adherence to guideline appropriate care, and survival. Having recently attained board certification in two specialties (General Surgery and Colorectal Surgery) and fellowship in two professional societies (the American College of Surgeons, FACS, and the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons, FASCRS), her concrete next steps are to become more involved in those societies and move up the leadership ladder with the goal of affecting positive changes in colorectal cancer treatment as she climbs.

In addition to her professional achievements, Antonia and her husband, Martin Diaz III, are the proud parents of a two-year-old daughter, Adela. They are expecting their second child in June.



1998 Ron Brown Scholar Dr. Antonia Henry served as Director of Surgical Services at the NATO Multinational Medical Unit based at the Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan.