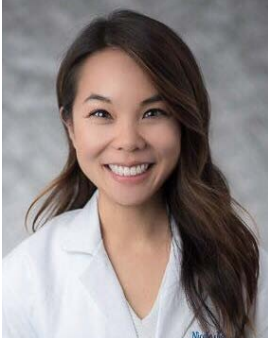


Meet the Researcher



Nicole Tin-Lok Jiam, M.D.

Mass Eye and Ear

Jiam received her medical degree from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and is now a neurotology and skull base surgeon-scientist at Mass Eye and Ear/Harvard Medical School. A 2024 Emerging Research Grants scientist, she is the recipient of an Elizabeth M. Keithley, Ph.D. Early Stage Investigator Award, generously supported in part by Susan and Steve Kaufman.

When I was 3, I toppled out of a window and fell face first into a thorny rose bush. There were sirens, there was blood, and when I regained consciousness, I had eight deep lacerations on my left cheek, permanently changing my visage. An otolaryngologist closed the wounds, and though I did not know it at the time, this was my first encounter with the field that I would come to love.

My parents encouraged me to focus on traits invisible to the eye and emphasized hard work, pursuit of excellence, and courage. This evolved into a passion for music because it conveyed what the physical world could not. Music quickly became my identity, and through this medium, I forgot I had scars.

While an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins, I met an intelligent, 27-year-old man with severe cerebral palsy. He was limited in his ability to communicate and connect with others, and it was a constant source of the implicit biases he encountered. Moved by his story, I secured funding to develop a mobile application. Still in use today, it is the only mobile platform that equips neurodevelopmentally disabled individuals with the tools to communicate their identity and needs with the world around them.

In medical school when I assisted in an otoplasty for a child born with microtia, I felt something click. Being a part of that ear reconstruction surgery ignited a desire to broaden my understanding of all fields within otolaryngology, and over the summer I began studying the perception of music in individuals with cochlear implants. This represented a perfect union of my interests in music, biomedical technology, and neuroscience—work that I now continue as a surgeon-scientist investigating how to improve

outcomes for pediatric patients with cochlear implants. My current research builds on my investigations from the past 10 years, while developing additional psychophysical and perception methodology training for personalized programming strategies.

As a surgeon-scientist, I am often reminded of the extent to which visible and invisible domains shape our identities. When I was a medical student I met a 3-year-old girl with severe facial tissue loss after being attacked by the family dog. In tears, the mother asked about her daughter's well-being, and if there would be a scar. That evening, I sat with her parents, provided reassurance, and shared my story with them. As I walked home the following morning, I felt grateful for the opportunity to have helped this family in some small way, secure in the knowledge that I am pursuing a field lying uniquely at the intersection of self-identity, creativity, science, and function. —

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