

## "It's Alive!"

Hernando J. "Joe" Ortega, Jr., M.D., M.P.H., FAsMA

AsMA's Annual Meeting in Las Vegas just finished. What an amazing time! Yes, I saw many old friends, a lot of great science, and not enough young flight surgeons. But from the perspective of president-elect, along with a background that uses "systems thinking," I notice something about the meeting that was a bit different this time; something more "biological." The Annual Meeting is "alive." Oh, come on, Bugs, really? Yes. Hear me out. Many of you, particularly those who are more peripherally involved, don't really notice the intricacy of the meeting you attend for CME or MOC. You typically see only the Welcome, the scientific sessions, and perhaps a Constituent Organization or partner reception (or two). But the meeting's breadth and complexity are striking. And its various ways of coming together, of communicating, of thinking through issues, of separating functions, of accomplishing tasks, of moving AsMA forward, are truly captivating. Every year the meeting coalesces somewhere to live out its ephemeral time as an organism, a living breathing, thinking organism.

The organism that is the Aerospace Medical Association is truly a wonder to behold. The membership (and non-members alike) comes together to perform a wide variety of functions, some vital and some just frivolous and fun. Individuals from around the globe descend upon a group of rooms in a hotel or convention center. The staff prepares the "skeleton" of the organism with year-round efforts, setting up computer databases, arranging speakers and booths and merchandise and lunches and events. *The foot bone connected to the leg bone....* The abstract submission process is connected to the website. The abstract review process is connected to the Scientific Program committee. *The leg bone connected to the knee bone....* The Scientific Program committee is connected to the November Council Meeting. *The knee bone connected to the thigh bone....* The skeletal anatomy is quite extensive. The Nominating Committee is operating behind the scenes to vet and select future leadership. *The thigh bone connected to the back bone....* Then in the Spring, the organism begins to breathe. *The back bone connected to the neck bone....* Members and non-members coalesce into functional groups or committees to accomplish vital tasks, menial tasks, internal work, external projects, global cooperative efforts, small sub-meetings, other improvement efforts, etc., taking AsMA forward "one small step" at a time. Small groups begin to clump early, like the NATO cardiology folks or the International Airline Medical Association (formerly AMDA). Then a key organelle starts to take shape, the registration committee that will greet and take care of attendees. On Sunday the nerve center comes together in AsMA's Council to do the work of governance and fiduciary responsibility. *The neck bone connected to the head bone....* Still other symbiotic organisms,

like IAASM, begin to form, coordinating international meetings in our specialty. Nodes of scientific workshops on various subjects spring forth. Constituent organization leaders connect to perform governance meetings and event planning.

Key immune functions like Bylaws Committee interact to continue incremental improvements to AsMA. Perhaps the most circadian-challenged group, the GLOC (Global Liaison and Outreach Committee), meets to continue dendritic growth into other global regions to extend AsMA's reach. First time attendees get a crash course in this anatomy for the week. Then a large agglutination of cells gathers at the Exhibit Hall in the social milieu of the Welcome party. And off we go.

The worldwide community of Aerospace Medicine professionals is strong and viable. Indeed, the Federal Air Surgeon asked AsMA to make key recommendations on contents for inflight medical kits to the FAA, which the Air Transport Medicine committee has made. International organizations continue to seek collaboration with AsMA. All are vital parts of the organism that is AsMA and its Annual Meeting. But there are those who seek to disrupt and degrade our specialty, our organization, even the overall organism of AsMA. Some seek to interrupt various pathways to our specialty from the outside, like an infectious attack on the organism. Some external threats are not willful but opportunistic. Changing conditions left unrecognized could render AsMA and our meeting weakened. We must be alert and prepared to adapt. It will take conscious and vigorous "immune responses" by all of us to not only repel the invaders but also to reinvigorate the foundations of our specialty, the principles and knowledge that are used by we experts in practicing our professions. Threats are not always external. Some sow the seeds of discontent like a "hyperplastic" transformation within our vital organs, the Constituents, and even AsMA committees. Some seek to radically alter AsMA from the inside, akin to an "auto-immune" response to AsMA's own parts. This must not happen unchallenged. Each of us should be on the alert for these kinds of individuals. They are remarkably destructive, can leave an organization hollowed out and dysfunctional, poison individual relationships, and place the reputation and ethic of the entire organism into turmoil and disrepute.



Reprint & Copyright © by the Aerospace Medical Association, Alexandria, VA.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3357/AMHP.907PP.2019>

### CONTACT DETAILS:

**Email:** [President@asma.org](mailto:President@asma.org) • **Web site:** [www.asma.org](http://www.asma.org) • **Facebook:** Aerospace Medical Association • **Twitter:** @Aero\_Med

PRESIDENT'S PAGE, *continued*

AsMA has come a long way since the last time it met in Vegas: 1987. Maj. Gen. Robert Fassold was the president that year. He was a Royal Canadian Air Force B-25 and de Havilland Comet pilot who entered medical school to become the first Canadian pilot physician. He became ABPM Board Certified in Aerospace Medicine in 1973. From 1980 through 1985 he was the Canadian Deputy Surgeon General and then became the Canadian Surgeon General for 3 years. Midway through his Surgeon General tour, he became AsMA president. His leadership and vision moved AsMA forward. Dr. Fassold passed away this past July 2, 2018. I joined AsMA in January of 1987. I am deeply humbled to follow in the footsteps of giants like Dr. Bob Fassold.

As the words of the children's song "*Dry Bones*" illustrate, AsMA's skeleton is robust and connected. As workforce demand

for aeromedical expertise grows--with increasing air traffic and commercial space travel--AsMA must adapt and grow to meet these challenges. We can ill afford to ignore events that weaken our profession's "skeleton" and this unique "organism" that provides the world critical leadership and knowledge for the future. AsMA and our members are best prepared to meet these inevitable needs but will only be able to do so if we, the individual "cells" of AsMA, perform the critical "immune" functions of promoting, participating in, and protecting our organism. With the help of the forward motion by past presidents, and with strong traditions to guide us, I pledge to continue the moves to strengthen the organism that is AsMA, through international outreach, staunch defense, and vigorous reinforcement of the foundations of our specialty. Keep 'em flyin'.