

Looking Forward to Gender Neutrality

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I am writing this in June 2021, and greatly look forward to celebrating the first post-COVID, in-person Annual Scientific Meeting in Denver from August 30–September 2. I do not need to reiterate the tremendous changes that have occurred since then, dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, looking at the themes for AsMA from 2019 to the present, there is a direct nexus between the interests of the organization and world events. In 2019, Roland Vermeiren focused on the global connection of our organization with the theme “Aerospace Medicine *sans frontieres*.” Hernando “Joe” Ortega focused on aerospace medicine and using technology, precision-based aeromedical decision-making, and the role of selection and training to optimizing human performance in the aerospace environment. This last year, Charles “Chuck” DeJohn has spearheaded focus on the importance of research in advancing aerospace medicine. I think it no coincidence that the focus of AsMA has aligned with what has transpired on the global stage, particularly the importance of global inclusion and cooperation, use of best information and technology, and the development of and support for cutting edge research to address emerging problems.

I hope that this year’s meeting will attract as many members and first-time attendees as possible, noting that COVID-19 continues to present a moving playing field. We are benefitting from the continued increases in the numbers of vaccinated persons, both in the U.S. and world-wide. Unfortunately, there are continuing challenges to travel to attend the meeting, including differences between countries in vaccine availability and distribution, vaccination rates, and governmental policies in response to COVID and travel. Perhaps most concerning is the emergence of the Delta variant.

Switching to a different topic: “What’s in a Word?” The power of words, when and how they are used, has always been important. Witness political verbiage both ancient and recent, where words have been “weaponized” (a now popular term). Word usage has spawned the term “cancel culture,” a term originally describing a form of boycotting or shunning individuals deemed to have acted or spoken in a questionable manner. Now it is seemingly used as a general term to disparage other individuals or groups who think or act differently. What we say, including the words we choose and how we use them, is key in communicating with each other. As such, conversations are transactional, shared experiences moving towards a common understanding. Misunderstandings often hinge on differing interpretations or nuanced understandings of a single word.

Concern over wording has led to a recent recommendation to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) suggesting the adoption of gender-neutral language, including reconsideration of the term “airman.” I note that FAA regulations, orders, policies, etc. use

the term “airman” to refer to anyone who is a pilot or aircrew member, and this is true for the “Medical Standards and Certification regulation (Title 14, Code of Federal Regulations, part 67). However, the term “airman” does not appear to be inherently gender neutral. During my Aerospace Medicine residency in the 1990s, “gender neutral” was not even on the horizon regarding U.S. Navy or FAA regulations. Shortly after joining the FAA in 2006, I did recognize that “airman” just did not seem appropriate when referring to female aviators. I did ask about this but was assured (I don’t recall by whom) that “airman” was considered a gender-neutral term, much as “actor” is accepted for female or male thespians. Plus, “airman” was an enshrined term in our Federal Regulations, which was as good as being immutable. Being new to the organization, there did not seem to be an obvious path forward for potential change.

Therein lies the issue, i.e., failing to see the potential damage of long-established precedent. In the case of “airman,” what subtle cues might it transmit to women suggesting that they did not belong? I don’t see a way we can ever really know, though a clue to the potential ramifications might be the fact that women are still a small minority of pilots in the United States. Given the extraordinary changes in U.S. society over the last several decades, gender equality has come a long way, but inequality is still not a thing of the past. Consider pay inequity which, noting one recent report I heard, will still take several decades before women get the same compensation as men. (I do not want to get side-tracked here, but social and racial equality and justice are issues of equal importance in the United States and globally.)

So, it was with great interest I read an article (<https://medium.com/faa/removing-the-man-from-unmanned-aviation-bfa1855f59db>) that the FAA had tasked the Drone Advisory Committee to address this issue raised by the term “unmanned aircraft,” and tasked the DAC to develop recommendations for gender-neutral language and provide recommendations that organizations across the industry and community can implement. As a father of three daughters and grandfather of two granddaughters, I whole-heartedly support the initiative not only in the United States but across our international aviation and aerospace medicine communities.

See you in Denver!



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