

Beginnings and Endings on Interstate 10

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

So there I was.... Lent had just started. I was on Interstate 10 between Houston and San Antonio. Ding! A notification from my iPhone. "Your last President's Page is due next week." Again? Could this really be my 12th column? Has it been that long? I was overwhelmed by an amazing symmetry of this past year. Some of you will recall the story of my first President's Page – a talk in Houston, an email from Pam Day, and a short suspense... and a drive on I-10 between Houston and San Antonio.

I wrote of considering what it would mean to be AsMA's President. Back then, I started out thinking about Drs. Berry, Chuck, and Mike with whom I had just had the honor of sharing a panel at the American Academy of Sports Medicine annual conference. I came up with a long series of questions about AsMA, its goals, its purposes, its potential, as well as questions about Aerospace Medicine (AM) as a specialty, its current state, its viability, its future.¹ When I re-read the list of questions I was a bit surprised.

Over the ensuing columns, my "muse" actually addressed most of those questions with views on AM and the vital work that all of you do—the teamwork of Team Aerospace,² the framework of AM,^{1,4} the "specialness" of AM, potential risks to AM, and the need to market AM and partner with others.⁷ I offered some perspectives on the specialties of Preventive Medicine compared to the rest of clinical medicine, as well as highlighted the amazing breadth of AM and discussed some areas for our specialty to increase its visibility and participation.⁸

This year AsMA has undertaken a key international membership initiative, as well as participated in cooperative ventures with our global peers.³ The AsMA ExComm recently performed a strategic planning session to align our efforts across functional areas and to focus on the upcoming joint meeting with a partner society, the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society. The AsMA Fellows Group is improving its processes and discussing ways to reach out and promote our specialty in the broader health care world.⁶ AMSRO has become a constituent and is growing interest in AM with its constituency. I even challenged you all to help grow the resources of our AsMA Foundation in order to realize its intended role and ultimate potential in supporting the goals of AsMA.⁵

The Executive Director and the ExComm have penned multiple letters to government agencies regarding timely AM topics—terrain avoidance hardware for helicopters, standard of care/scope of practice issues in medicine, in-flight emergency kit contents, AM residency training issues, and the Congressional Commission on military aircraft safety. AsMA presented an educational session at an AMA meeting on In-Flight Medical Emergencies. I visited with Senate Armed Services Committee staffers regarding workforce issues and future needs for AM specialists given the current administration's priorities. I spoke with the Congressional

Committee on Science, Space and Technology's subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics about research gaps and funding in Aerospace Medicine. It has been quite the busy year. But a year already? Wow... time flies.

At present, the Drs. Berry are again weighing heavily on my mind, my heart, and my soul. You see, Dr. Chuck Berry passed away last week. I returned to I-10 to attend his remembrance and funeral. It seems surreal that less than a year ago, we shared the stage here in Houston. Chuck was an oversized influence on just about everything he touched—the U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine (USAFSAM), NASA, the astronauts, the nation's Moon efforts, an untold number of pilots, the FAA, the International Association of Aviation and Space Medicine (IAASM), AsMA, and indeed the specialty of Aerospace Medicine worldwide.

But more importantly, Chuck's influence extended well beyond his professional efforts. I had the privilege of spending time with the Berry family this past weekend. They spoke eloquently and passionately from the heart about their "Papa." He clearly had the same oversized influence on his family, his children, his grandchildren and great grandchildren, friends, neighbors, and his community.

Dr. Berry took it upon himself to find me at an AsMA meeting in 1995. I had been assigned to NASA's Johnson Space Center as part of a new program to allow U.S. Air Force (USAF) flight surgeons to gain operational experience with manned spaceflight support. He introduced himself and asked me how I liked NASA. He made a point of saying how he was pleased that the USAF had seen fit to return flight surgeon support to manned spaceflight. Then he told me the story of how he arrived at NASA.

After joining the USAF during the Korean War, he was asked to train in a new residency program at USAFSAM in a recently recognized new specialty, Aviation Medicine. After a tour in Panama, Dr. Berry went to Harvard for his Masters in Public Health and then became board certified in the new preventive specialty. During his next tour at USAFSAM, he participated in the selection process of the original seven astronauts. Then he was asked to leave the Air Force to work as a civilian physician for the newly formed NASA as the nation entered the space race, culminating in the Apollo Moon landings 50 years ago. He again told me he was happy to see the return of proper USAF interest in manned



Reprint & Copyright © by the Aerospace Medical Association, Alexandria, VA.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3357/AMHP.915.PresPage>

CONTACT DETAILS:

Email: President@asma.org • **Web site:** www.asma.org • **Facebook:** Aerospace Medical Association • **Twitter:** @Aero_Med

spaceflight. He left me with an over the shoulder, "I know you won't let us down. Let me know if you need anything."

There I was, a stunned Air Force Major, nonchalantly chatting with this unassuming legend who pointed out the unrealized similarities in our journeys. How did I get into a position that I could even have the opportunity to let down Dr. Chuck Berry? I'm still bewildered by that. But with his family last weekend, I reveled in many more stories of his huge heart, his ever-present smile, his love of family, fishing, and aerospace medicine.

Dr. Berry was a Past President of AsMA, as was his son, Mike. Chuck was also Past President of the other preeminent aerospace medicine organization, IAASM, as was his son Mike (again). The current IAASM President Dr. James Vanderploeg and I took the occasion of a photo with Mike and a portrait of his father (**Fig. 1**) in tribute to the amazing legacy of Dr. Charles A. Berry. You have truly "slipped the surly bonds of Earth" and now have conquered "the high untrespassed sanctity of space, ...and touched the face of God" (from "High Flight" by John Gillespie Magee, Jr.). Godspeed to you, Chuck.

Symmetry. My experience with the regular monthly written communications to you began when sharing a stage with Dr. Berry in Houston and the presidential year wrapped up on the same highway, back in Houston, mourning the loss of the same Chuck Berry. I could not have foretold how this year would unfold even if you had given me a thousand years to imagine.

As I roll into the aircraft shelter and shut down engines, it has been my honor to serve this amazing association. I thank you all immensely for the opportunity. So what *does* it mean to be AsMA president? Besides writing 12 journal columns that is...;-) It is to follow in the footsteps of giants. It is to serve the specialty of AM and improve our association. It is to strive for excellence in every endeavor. It is to advance science and medicine in support of those who work and fly in air, space, and extreme environments. And as always, it is to keep 'em all safe and flying. From the bottom of my heart, thank you, AsMA.

P.S. 22 March 2020: I could not have foretold how this year would unfold even if you had given me a thousand years to imagine. As of this very minute, we sit in the midst of the unfolding COVID-19 crisis that has roiled life the world over and postponed our Annual Meeting. This is only the second time in 91 years this has ever happened to our association (the first was



Fig. 1. From left to right are Drs. Joe Ortega, Mike Berry, the photo of Charles Berry, and James Vanderploeg.

in 1945 during WWII). What an amazing end to a wonderful year... that isn't really over! The staff and the ExComm are working overtime to retool the annual meeting for October in the same Atlanta venue. Stay tuned for more developments! Keep 'em flying.

REFERENCES

1. Ortega HJ Jr. Team aerospace. *Aerosp Med Hum Perform.* 2019; 90(6):505.
2. Ortega HJ Jr. Team aerospace revisited. *Aerosp Med Hum Perform.* 2019; 90(10):832–833.
3. Ortega HJ Jr. International meetings: global partnerships. *Aerosp Med Hum Perform.* 2019; 90(11):915–916.
4. Ortega HJ Jr. A tough assignment. *Aerosp Med Hum Perform.* 2019; 90(12):991–992.
5. Ortega HJ Jr. Challenge: reach for the stars. *Aerosp Med Hum Perform.* 2020; 91(1):2–3.
6. Ortega HJ Jr. Fellowship in perspective. *Aerosp Med Hum Perform.* 2020; 91(2):63–64.
7. Ortega HJ Jr. A special specialty. *Aerosp Med Hum Perform.* 2020; 91(3):121–122.
8. Ortega HJ Jr. Aeromedical transport—a niche for Aerospace Medicine. *Aerosp Med Hum Perform.* 2020; 91(4):311–312.