



From the Editor's Desk

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True Story—IFSO to the Rescue

I am writing this from 40,000 ft above Alaska, as I am on an airplane returning from the IFSO APC 2019 meeting that was just held in Guangzhou, China. Kudos to C.C. Wang, Muffi Lakdawala, and the IFSO APC 2019 organizing committee for holding such a successful meeting. Having become “empty nesters,” I was accompanied by my wife, Susie. We took a few extra days to get to see some of China. Having a day free, we took the advice to take the high-speed train to Hong Kong, only 1 h ride away. We spent a pleasant day exploring Hong Kong and headed back to the train station that evening to catch the 21:20 train back to Guangzhou. All seemed well as we navigated along with everyone else through the immigration maze. We got to the third and final passport check and seemed to be home-free. However, the

electronically controlled doors rejected our passports, resulting in our being escorted by two immigration officers to another kiosk, where we were questioned as to why we were trying to enter China with expired visas. Apparently, our visas were for only one entry, but neither of us knew that. Neither did we know that, although Hong Kong is part of China, going there counted as a departure from China.

At that point, we were escorted into a small room, where two other officers screamed questions at us. Their English was difficult to understand, which made the situation worse. The male officer was mostly quiet while the female officer did most of the yelling... er, talking. Shortly thereafter, another female officer, perhaps a supervisor, who was calmer than the first two and spoke better English, explained to us our situation. In short, we would need to get new visas and until such time, we would not be allowed to return to China. Given that it was Saturday night, it was likely that we would be stuck in Hong Kong until Monday. At the time, we had only the clothes we were wearing. Everything else, including our medications, was back at the hotel in Guangzhou. Not anticipating staying in Hong Kong, we had traveled lightly. Additionally, our flights home the next day were early in the morning. I also had cases to do on Tuesday. The magnitude of the situation began to sink in.

Apparently, there were several offices where one could get a visa quickly if they were open (and one had the proper documents). In that little room was a sign that listed two such places. One office was said to be open 24 h. We took a picture of the sign, in an effort to save that piece of information. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, a railway station worker and the immigration officer escorted us to one such office located in the station. I was elated for what seemed to be a quick resolution. That was to be the first of many highs and lows that we experienced during the ordeal. It seemed that although the lights were still on, the office had just closed. If only we were not kept in that little room so long!

At that time, the railway station workers suggested that we take a train to Lo Wu, a stop on the border of China proper where the immigration officer might be able to give us

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temporary visas and let us go back to Guangzhou. We deciphered the Hong Kong local train service and got on the local train to Lo Wu. After 40 min, 10 stop train ride, we arrived to find a single immigration officer. We explained the circumstances, and, unlike the officers in metro Hong Kong, he was pleasant and understanding. Unfortunately, he could give us visas to get to Shenzhen, but not Guangzhou. He did offer a possible solution, however. He suggested that we go back to metro Hong Kong and take the local train to Guangzhou. On that line, the immigration apparatus was in Guangzhou, not Hong Kong. Once there, we might be able to speak with an immigration supervisor and be granted entry into Guangzhou.

It was now past 10 p.m. and we got back on the local train to downtown Hong Kong. The plan seemed logical, if we could catch that train at this late hour. However, if the visa office was closed, we would be spending the night in the railway station. We also did not know how late that train operated. Weighing all the issues, we decided to try again in the morning. Earlier in the day, we had noted several hotels in the harbor area, and we hoped to take a taxi to the harbor and find a room in one of the hotels for the night. We got back to the metro Hong Kong station around 11 p.m. It was very quiet in the station; few people remained at that hour. We found our way through the large train station to the taxi line. There were roughly 30 people in line waiting for a taxi. Strangely, very few taxis came at all, and it seemed to take forever. Sometime after midnight, a railway worker came up to those of us still waiting for taxis and stated that the station was closing, and there would be no more taxis that night. His poor English made it difficult to understand. However, when we saw the others disperse, we knew that the night was getting even longer. We started walking. It was almost 1 a.m., drizzling, dark, and lonely. We also were not sure which direction to walk. All we could think about was how dark and deserted the area was, and that we were easy targets for a robbery or an assault. Additionally, both of our cellphones were near exhaustion, so we could not use them.

After about 20 min of walking, Susie spotted a taxi, and tired, hungry, and frightened, we arrived in the harbor region. To our great surprise and disappointment, the Sheraton and Intercontinental hotels were full. We were fortunate to get a room in a beautiful old hotel called the Peninsula Hotel. The price for the night in this 5-star hotel was steep, but well worth the money; it was far better than sleeping on the street in the rain. We took hot showers and slept in the hotel robes. We decided that we would take the train to Guangzhou in the morning and plead our case. Not sleeping well that night, we were up early. We went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast.

The day prior to the ordeal, I had been invited to have lunch with a group of Chinese surgeons. We had a wonderful Japanese lunch at a restaurant somewhere downtown in

Guangzhou. The food was great, and the company was even better. I made several new friends and we exchanged business cards and phone numbers. That commonplace event turned out to be critical. One of the lunch guests with whom I became friendly was Dr. Miu Tsui. He lives in Hong Kong, and we had originally planned that we would try to meet for dinner together in Hong Kong before Susie and I would travel back to Guangzhou. The dinner plans never materialized, but as our situation was unfolding, I texted Miu that we might need his help. As both Susie's and my cell phones depleted their batteries sometime that night, I could not contact Miu until the morning. I awoke the next morning and noticed that Miu had sent several texts to me overnight, he having learned from a friend that there was a Chinese visa office nearby, and it was open on Sundays. Miu met us there early that morning. I was again elated to see that the office was open. We went inside and spoke to the agent. Thankfully, Miu was there to translate for us; otherwise, I do not think we would have had any chance of leaving Hong Kong in the next few days. Unfortunately, my elation again turned to disappointment, as the agent's body language and long dialog with Miu spoke volumes. She could not issue us visas, and we would need to go to the Chinese or American consulates on Monday for help. The thought of another day without fresh clothes, finding another hotel room, canceling and rebooking flights, and canceling surgeries on Tuesday was more than depressing. Not having our medications for another day was very concerning.

As it truly looked dismal, the agent made one more suggestion. She stated that it was a longshot, but we could take the local train to Guangzhou and plead our case there. This was also what the immigration officer in Lo Wu had told us. Miu drove us back to the hotel where we printed from our phones all pertinent documents, such as the airline itinerary, hotel reservation, and meeting invitation. The 2-h train ride felt like 12 h. We did not talk much; I kept thinking about what I was going to say to the immigration agents to persuade them to give us new visas.

We arrived in Guangzhou and joined the others entering the passport control kiosks. Susie and I ended up in different lines, she slightly ahead of me. As soon as I reached the counter, I heard a commotion coming from her direction and realized the fun had begun. Within minutes, two or three immigration officers were coming toward me. We then were together in front of the supervisor's desk pleading our case. At first, they seemed uninterested in our plight. I was wondering if we would be placed on the next train back to Hong Kong or stay indefinitely in the rail station. The supervisor then offered us two options; to go back to Hong Kong or try to get new visas in Guangzhou. In the back of this large immigration hall was a small, nondescript, visa application office. It was obvious! We were escorted to the office, where a young, eager officer pored over our documents for almost 2 h. At some point, her supervisor came over and did the same. She then reviewed my

passport and questioned my previous travel. Then, without telling us that we were going to get the new visas, the officer started to process the paperwork. I was elated but held it in as we had been disappointed on several occasions. Now, all that stood in our way was the payment. They would only accept Chinese money (yuan), not American or Hong Kong dollars, credit cards, or personal checks. Neither of us carried much money. We pooled all of the cash we had and were separately escorted to a money changer in the rail station. Amazingly, we had just enough for the visas and the taxi ride back to our hotel.

This story was not meant to criticize the Chinese immigration system (we were the ones who had made a mistake to begin with), but to praise IFSO for cultivating an international fraternity among members from all over the world. In a global environment of world politics that causes and fuels hatred and violence, IFSO is an example for the rest of the world. In this case, a chance lunch meeting resulted in a friendship that turned a desperate situation into a good outcome. I am grateful to Dr. Miu Tsui for his help that day and for his ongoing friendship, as well as for my involvement in IFSO, which has provided me far more than “just” a professional surgical society.

The Cavalry Is Here Our reviewers are the backbone of the journal. The quality of the journal is only as good as the quality of the published articles, which reflects the quality of the submitted manuscripts and the work of the reviewers in improving the raw manuscripts. Additionally, they assist in weeding out the weaker papers. Obesity Surgery reviewer database lists approximately 500 individuals. Some inactive and retired reviewers may still be listed in the database and we do what we can to remove them. That still leaves us with a large number of reviewers. However, the number never seems to be sufficient, and the same reviewers are repeatedly and too-frequently asked to review papers. Therefore, for my yearly Springer project, I decided to recruit 25 new reviewers. With the help of IFSO President Almino Ramos, I am happy to report that we have recruited almost 100 new reviewers (and apparently that number is increasing!) This should reduce the time it takes to process a newly submitted manuscript. To those 100 new reviewers, thank you and welcome.

The Editorial Board Face Lift At the conclusion of each calendar year, I review the editorial board. Some editors retire and we fill any openings. This year was no different, as I rejuvenated the board altogether. I added several excellent new associate editors and editors, thereby expanding the size of the board. Hopefully, like adding new reviewers, the addition of new editors should improve the time it takes to process a submitted manuscript. I welcome the new members and also thank the retiring editors for their great service to the journal.

What Is an Advisory Editor? I am sure that you knew from the journal’s masthead that Ricardo Cohen, Paul O’Brien, and Michel Suter were advisory editors, but perhaps you did not know what that meant. In addition to their roles as associate editors, advisory editors also assist me in forming the direction of the journal. For example, they participated in the changing of the journal’s cover page. They offer suggestions for review article topics and also have helped bring in new reviewers and editors. In essence, they are involved in many of the decisions that set the future path for the journal. The original concept was to choose one advisory editor from each of the IFSO chapters: Ricardo Cohen—LAC, Paul O’Brien—APC, and Michel Suter—EC. I was to represent NAC. However, as we now have a fifth chapter—MENAC, we decided to add two more advisory editors. Stacy Brethauer now represents the NAC and Salman Al Sabah, the MENAC. I welcome their addition and their input.

Honoring Our Leaders Since January of 2016, I have honored the leaders in bariatric/metabolic surgery by publishing their biosketches as the first article of each issue. I have now honored 41 individuals from all over the world. I would like to keep this going as long as possible. If you are a veteran bariatric/metabolic clinician, and have contributed in some way to our field, please send me a one-page biography and a headshot picture (sshikora@bwh.harvard.edu). If you are junior in the field, but want to honor your mentor, teacher, or senior associate, please send me their biography and headshot.

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