NIH FUNDING AND STRUCTURE
NIH’s SMRB Meets to Review Status of Recommendations

On October 26, the NIH’s Scientific Management Review Board (SMRB) held its tenth meeting to review the status of its recommendations on structure and management issues, which is its mission, as enacted in the NIH Reform Act of 2006.

In welcoming the SMRB, NIH Director Dr. Francis Collins, commented that NIH faces a serious challenge in terms of resources and that it “may be necessary to scale back on some things in order to do new things.” He explained that NIH is actively working on strategies for dealing with the agency’s budget challenges. In this regard, he noted that NIH had to renege on some multi-year grants to make resources available for new projects. He said that similar tough strategies may need to be employed, especially if the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction fails in its task and across-the-board sequestration takes effect in FY2013—the outcome of which he described as “draconian.” Among the other strategies NIH is considering is trimming spending Institute-wide, evaluating and re-arranging the research portfolio, and changing the ways NIH manages its resources.

Below appears a brief summary of the status of each of the SMRB’s recommendations:

NCATS: The fate of the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences—the centralized translational research entity—rests in the hands of Congress (see chart on previous page), as the FY2012 Senate LHHS bill would implement it, abolish the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR) and move most of its programs into NCATS, and fund the Cures Acceleration Network (CAN) within NCATS at $20 million. The FY2012 House LHHS draft is silent on NCATS, maintains NCRR funding, and would only permit up to $2 million for a CAN Advisory Board to develop an implementation plan. Dr. Collins commented that House LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee chair Denny Rehberg (R-MT) was “still somewhat skeptical of the NCATS proposal.”

Clinical Center: The SMRB had recommended that the Clinical Center be funded as a separate line item in future appropriations, but NIH legal counsel advised that this change could limit funding options. NIH has issued an October 12 request for comments on how extramural researchers can partner with the intramural program. ARVO has requested input from its members, with comments due at NIH by December 1.

Substance Use, Abuse, and Addiction Task Force: The SMRB had recommended that the separate institutes on Drug and Alcohol Abuse be eliminated and a new “Addiction Institute” (tentatively called the National Institute of Substance Use and Addiction Disorders) be formed. NIH Principal Deputy Director Lawrence Tabak, D.D.S., Ph.D. reported that NIH has been engaged in discussions with stakeholders and in portfolio review with the two existing institutes, and that an integration plan would issue in Fall 2012, with final recommendations to the NIH Director by December 2012 and budget planning in early 2013 for implementation in the FY2014 budget. NAEVR has been monitoring this process closely to see if it is precedent-setting for any other institute consolidations, such as a “Brain Institute” into which NEI could be clustered.

SBIR/STTR Program: This meeting was the first at which the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs were discussed. Dr. Collins asked that the SMRB form a Task Force to recommend how the NIH can optimize the utilization of the these programs to foster innovation, to attract quality proposals that yield the greatest potential for successful conclusions, and to leverage resources and expertise to maximize support to ensure the success of its grant recipients.

The SMRB will next meet on December 21, at which a discussion is planned on how NIH can manage its future resources (see box below).

Visit the NIH/NEI funding section of NAEVR’s Web site at www.eyeresearch.org for full details

NAEVR Joins Your Candidates, Your Health

NAEVR has become a sponsor of Research!America’s Your Candidates, Your Health, an effort focused on educating constituents about the views of Congressional and Presidential candidates on medical research. NAEVR, which is the only sponsor from the vision advocacy community, has had a long relationship with R!A, jointly issuing a Vision and Blindness fact sheet now in its second edition.

NIH Requests Comments on How to Manage Resources

NIH’s Office of Extramural Research has posted on its Web site a document entitled Ways of Managing NIH Resources. The document describes how NIH currently manages grants, provides new analyses and trend data, and describes other future options for grant management, including:

- Reducing or limiting the size of the awards
- Limiting the number of awards held by a Principal Investigator (PI)
- Limiting the amount of funds a PI can hold
- Limiting salaries of PIs

NAEVR is working with ARVO’s Advocacy Committee to prepare comments on these options and submit a request to present public testimony at the December 21 meeting of the SMRB, which has requested time to discuss this issue and advise Dr. Collins.