On November 6, Colonel Donald Gagliano, M.D., was named Director of the Vision Center of Excellence. Most recently, Dr. Gagliano served as Director of the Clinical Investigations Regulatory Office in the U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command. Claude Cowan, Jr., M.D., a former NAEVR Board member, will serve as the Center’s Deputy Director.

The Vision Center of Excellence will address the prevention, diagnosis, mitigation, treatment, and rehabilitation of military eye injuries, as well as coordinate work on the Injury Registry. The Center will also facilitate vision research, including research on prevention, visual dysfunction related to traumatic brain injury (TBI), and military eye injuries. Although the Vision Center of Excellence is a DOD program, it will coordinate with the VA.

NAEVR joined the vision community in strongly supporting the Center/Registry legislation, which was sponsored by Congressman John Boozman (R-AR). NAEVR was fortunate to have met with Dr. Gagliano on November 5, along with representatives of several Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), and to host him a few days later at a meeting of the NAEVR Board of Directors held at the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) annual meeting.

Moreover, FY2009 Defense appropriations include, for the first time, a separate line item for Peer Reviewed Vision Research, which is funded at $4 million within the Department of Defense (DOD). The final FY2009 Defense, Military Construction/Veterans Affairs, and Homeland Security spending bills were included in the Continuing Resolution (CR) passed by Congress and signed by the President on September 30, which funded the remaining government operations at the FY2008 level (see NIH story inside). NAEVR advocated for this dedicated funding, having educated House and Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee members about the devastating eye injuries experienced by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Army’s Dr. Donald Gagliano Named as Director of the Vision Center of Excellence

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The Vision Center of Excellence and an accompanying Military Eye Injury Registry were provisions of the Military Eye Trauma Treatment Act (METTA) that were included in FY2008 National Defense Authorization Act, passed in early 2008 but not funded at that time. Subsequently, Congress included $6.9 million in funding in the FY2009 Military Construction/Veteran Affairs appropriations bill passed in late September 2008, with an additional $2 million for development of the Injury Registry.

The Vision was previously one of 21 areas of research competing for a pool of $50 million of funds in the Peer Reviewed Medical Research Program (PRMRP). In FY2009, vision researchers will compete against vision researchers for the $4 million administered by the Army. A program announcement will likely issue in early 2009. Although vision researchers have competed successfully in the PRMRP in the past— for example, in FY2006, the first year of eligibility, vision researchers were awarded $5.4 million—the competition had increased significantly due to a new structure for award mechanisms. FY2008 PRMRP awards are expected in late 2008/early 2009.

In September, DOD announced additional FY2008 funds through the Deployment Related Medical Research Program (DRMRP), a $92 million pool of funds created by the mid-year Supplemental Appropriations Act. The DRMRP has specifically requested grant proposals in the vision space, including visual/ocular trauma treatment and rehabilitation, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and wound infection. Awards are expected in first-quarter 2009.

NAEVR Advocacy Manager David Epstein with Colonel Robert Mazzoli, M.D., Chief of Ophthalmology at Madigan Army Medical Center, at a September 2008 Schepens Eye Institute Symposium on Military Eye Trauma

Dr. Gagliano with Tom Zampieri, Ph.D., Blinded Veterans Association, who advocated strenuously for the creation and funding of the Vision Center/Injury Registry

Full details appear in the NAEVR Web site Advocacy Center’s section on Defense-related Vision Research