NIH Acting Director Dr. Raynard Kington Testifies On Economic Impact of Research

On October 31, former NIH Principal Deputy Director Raynard Kington, M.D., Ph.D., began serving as Acting NIH Director. On November 13, he testified at a House Energy and Commerce Committee Health Subcommittee hearing, chaired by Cong. Frank Pal-lone (D-NJ) and entitled Treatments for an Ailing Economy: Protecting Health Care Coverage and Investing in Biomedical Research. Dr. Kington addressed the short- and long-term economic impact of NIH grants, noting that any economic stimulus funds made available to the NIH could be administered quickly with little overhead. In response to questions, he stated that each $500 million increment of additional NIH funding translates into 1,400 grants and 9,000 jobs. During questions, Subcommittee member Michael Burgess, M.D., (R-TX) stressed that the NIH Reform Act of 2006 had authorized funding increases which had not translated into appropriations. He reiterated the Committee’s intention in that legislation for sustained increases and expressed his desire that NIH receives these, whether through an economic stimulus bill or final FY2009 appropriations.

Dr. Kington Briefs NIH Council of Councils on NIH Priorities

During November 20 comments to the NIH Council of Councils—the entity created by the NIH Reform Act of 2006 to guide NIH on trans-Institute initiatives funded by the common fund—Dr. Kington commented on impending NIH actions.

The Scientific Management Review Board will meet initially in January 2009 to determine NIH management/structural issues it will address. Dr. Kington predicted that the SMRB would issue a report within a year of the arrival of a new NIH Director, noting that the Institute of Medicine (IOM) issued its 2003 report entitled Enhancing the Vitality of the NIH about a year after Dr. Zerhouni was confirmed (NAEVR Board President Dr. Ryan was a member of the IOM Committee that issued the report).

The Department of Health and Human Services plans to issue an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPR) to solicit public comment in advance of modifying regulations governing financial conflicts of interest among extramural investigators receiving grant support from NIH. He could not predict timing, especially with the change in Administration. NAEVR will work with ARVO to coordinate a vision community response.

Full details about these events appear in the NAEVR Web site Advocacy Center’s section on NIH/NEI appropriations

Dr. Zerhouni Urges Predictable and Sustained Funding in Last Hill Appearance

NAEVR commended the testimony presented by NIH Director Elias Zerhouni, M.D., at a September 9 hearing of the House Energy and Commerce Committee’s Health Subcommittee on the status of implementation of the NIH Reform Act of 2006. Dr. Zerhouni acknowledged that, although the law has helped NIH to streamline governance and to better plan short-term, its ability to plan medium-to-long term is limited by the lack of predictable and sustained funding increases. He cited the latter as the primary cause of NIH’s biggest challenge—workforce issues, specifically those related to the training and retention of new investigators and clinician-scientists.

“Invest in the talent pool first to ensure a pathway to success,” he said, adding that this requires stabilizing the NIH success rate for grant awards, which he recommended at least 30 percent. Currently, NIH projects the FY2009 success rate at 18 percent, the lowest level in 40 years. Dr. Zerhouni also emphasized the importance of “high risk, high reward” research, noting various funding mechanisms to support such research within the NIH common fund established by the 2006 law.

On October 30, NAEVR’s James Jorkasky attended the farewell event for NIH Director Dr. Elias Zerhouni, at his invitation. Previously, NAEVR Board President Dr. Stephen Ryan sent a letter of appreciation, thanking Dr. Zerhouni for his exemplary leadership in navigating the NIH through a period of significant scientific breakthroughs and a challenging funding environment. At the event, Mr. Jorkasky offered NAEVR’s full support to incoming Acting NIH Director Raynard Kington, who has had significant past outreach with the advocacy community.

Dr. Kington and Lana Skirboll, Ph.D., who was named on November 4 as the Acting Director of the Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives (DPCPSI), which is the entity created by the NIH Reform Act of 2006 to coordinate trans-Institute initiatives, including the NIH common fund.

Dr. Skirboll with Lenworth Johnson, M.D., (Mason Eye Institute, University of Missouri/Columbia), who serves as the National Advisory Eye Council’s (NAEC) representative to the Council of Councils. At the meeting, Dr. Johnson reported on an early October 2008 conference that addressed the science of science management.