Hearings Put NIH—and Vision Issues—in the Spotlight

The Appropriations hearings held in conjunction with the Fiscal Year (FY) 2005 budget process (see accompanying story) enabled NIH Director Dr. Elias Zerhouni to state his priorities for the NIH, generally, and for he and NEI Director Dr. Paul Sieving to elaborate on the vital role of eye and vision research, specifically. In comments at the April 1 Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) Appropriations Subcommittee hearing, Chairman Arlen Specter (R-PA) joined colleagues from both sides of the aisle in recognizing the importance of the NIH and acknowledging past successful bipartisan actions that doubled the NIH budget over the past five years. They cautioned, however, that the 2.6% increase proposed in the FY2005 budget could jeopardize the momentum of discovery.

Dr. Zerhouni cited NIH’s five priorities: chronic diseases, aging, health disparities, co-morbidities, and biodefense. Not surprisingly, eye and vision research plays a pivotal role in the success of these priorities. In fact, in response to a question about the NEI’s plans for an Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD) Clinical Trials Network, Dr. Sieving noted the increasing incidence of AMD as the population ages, the ability to work across several Institutes due to the neurodegenerative nature of AMD, and to follow up on the previous NEI-sponsored Age-related Eye Diseases Study (AREDS) demonstrating that high levels of antioxidant nutrients and zinc significantly reduce the risk of advanced AMD.

At the April 21-22 House LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee hearings on the NIH Roadmap for Medical Research and Budget/Priorities, chaired by Cong. Ralph Regula (R-OH), Dr. Zerhouni described NEI’s research within the context of the Roadmap and trans-Institute initiatives, such as the NIH Neuroscience Blueprint (in which the NEI and nine other Institutes participate). In describing the importance of early detection, he praised the NEI-sponsored Early Treatment Diabetic Retinopathy Study’s identification of treatments that are 95% effective, while using the recently-released NEI data on age-related eye disease to praise the AREDS study’s findings.

For both hearings, NAEVR submitted a written statement by Board President Dr. Stephen Ryan and accompanying testimony that supported FY2005 funding for the NIH and the NEI at $30 billion and $711 million, respectively. The documents are available on the Web site at www.eyeresearch.org.

Dr. Zerhouni has also appeared before Subcommittee hearings of the House Energy and Commerce Committee on such topics as NIH priorities and investigator relationships. These hearings have been held in anticipation of legislation to reauthorize the NIH, according to Committee Chairman Joe Barton (R-TX), who noted that this action had not been taken since 1993.