At an April 21 Congressional Briefing sponsored by the Alliance for Eye and Vision Research (AEVR), NEI-funded researcher Dr. Christopher Girkin (University of Alabama at Birmingham, UAB) announced that research into the physiology of the optic nerve in African Americans is resulting in better techniques to detect glaucoma, which will impact current and future screening programs and subsequent treatment strategies.

Providing an update of the NEI-sponsored African Americans with Glaucoma Study about one-and-one-half years into the five-year study, Dr. Girkin stated that, “Improved detection techniques can determine at-risk characteristics of the optic nerve and better define the progressive changes that occur in the disease. Earlier detection results not only in earlier diagnosis, but will also have an impact on the clinical practice patterns in treatment of the disease.” He noted that the NEI-funded Ocular Hypertension Treatment Study has already shown that pressure-reducing drops can delay or prevent the onset of disease.

UAB colleague Cassandra Page spoke about the importance of outreach to the African American churches in the Birmingham area to recruit study participants, as prior research into physiological differences in the optic nerve have not been conducted in as large of a study population.

Congressman Artur Davis (D-AL) provided an introduction to the event and emphasized the importance of Congressional support for medical research generally, as well as that into health disparities, specifically. “You spend money on what you value, and our nation needs to invest in the health of all of its citizens,” said Cong. Davis. AEVR Executive Director James Jorkasky concluded by noting NEI’s leadership on health disparities research in relation to vision, citing studies NEI has co-sponsored with the National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities.

AEVR plans a September 21 Congressional Briefing on AMD, featuring Dr. Greg Hageman (University of Iowa). Visit www.eyeresearch.org for more details.