NAEVRI In the United Kingdom

NAEVRI Participates in Project Gemini, an Exchange Between US and UK Blinded Veterans

NAEVRI’s James Jorkasky was honored to participate in Project Gemini in late May, just prior to Memorial Day, in which blinded United States veterans travelled to England for a week to meet with blinded United Kingdom (UK) veterans. The program, now in its second year, is a joint initiative between NAEVR member organization Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) and Blind Veterans UK (formerly known as St. Dunstan’s). Its objective is to provide veterans who have recently lost their sight with opportunities to interact with men and women who have led happy and prosperous lives despite their blindness and can serve as role models. During the week, the veterans discussed blind rehabilitation and readjustment training, adaptive technology for the blind, and vision research, as well as visited attractions throughout England, many of which provided special tours in which the participants touched objects being described, such as armor, jewels, and architectural elements.

This year, the four American Army veterans who were blinded in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), including Steven Baskis, Dexter Durrante, Timothy Hornik, and Mark Shrand, interacted with UK veterans Billy Baxter (blinded in Bosnia), Darren Blanks, Bill Drinkwater, and Ken Facal. BVA Director of Government Relations Tom Zampieri, Ph.D., who is blind, VCE Director Colonel Donald Gagliano, M.D., and VCE Associate Director of Rehabilitation and Reintegration Bobbi Hillen also participated. Blind Veterans UK’s Cadet Youth Challenge Project Officer Colin Williamson and Membership Manager Simon Brown served as hosts.

On May 21, the delegation visited Moorfields Eye Hospital in London, where it was hosted by 2012-2013 ARVO President Peng Tee Khaw, M.D., Ph.D., who serves as the Director of Research and Development and Director at the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Biomedical Research Centre (BRC), based at Moorfields, and the University College of London (UCL) Institute of Ophthalmology. Moorfields’ researchers informed the audience of more than 50 invited guests about groundbreaking research to save and restore sight.

Comments on Project Gemini

“It was a pleasure and an honour to meet these brave American and British veterans, most of whom have lost their sight while serving their countries. We were able to explain to them some of the state-of-the-art research being carried out here and at other NIHR research facilities elsewhere in the country. The work we discussed included some exciting and positive developments in regenerating damaged and diseased nerve cells and new stem cell transplantation and drug delivery discoveries which may in the future lead to people with loss of vision having it restored.” —Dr. Khaw

“It was a remarkable and life-affirming experience that enabled me to reflect on the very reason why NAEVR exists—to ensure funding for vision research that brings hope to patients.” —Mr. Jorkasky

NAEVRI Attends NEI/UK Signing Ceremony for Collaborative Research into Ocular Immunology

On May 22, James Jorkasky attended a ceremony at Moorfields, at which the NEI signed a Human Ocular Immunology Consortium agreement with the UK’s NIHR BRC at Moorfields Eye Hospital and UCL Institute of Ophthalmology, University Hospitals Bristol National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust, and the University of Bristol. Dr. Khaw hosted the event at which the NEI was represented by Gyan Prakash, Ph.D., Associate Director for International Programs, and Robert Nussenblatt, M.D., M.P.H., Clinical Director for Human Immunology.

More than 100 attendees heard a series of presentations regarding the developing science of ocular immunology and how the Consortium can “fuse the scientifically and clinically powerful research from the two countries,” including immune platforms, advances in imaging, and the availability of patients, especially for a joint clinical trial for new therapies.

“We are all convinced that the Consortium agreement we have made to promote human ocular immunology, specifically to encourage the transfer of technologies, scholars, and biomaterials for the study of uveitis, age-related macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy, will greatly enhance our efforts to better understand and combat these common and often devastating eye diseases.” —Dr. Khaw