President’s Message

The New “Normal” in Vision Research Funding is Uncertainty

On a visit to Washington, D.C. this past weekend, uncertainty was the characteristic of the ongoing negotiations over the debt ceiling and deficit reduction. Clearly, these are challenging times that are creating a new “normal” for all of us involved in vision research, whether a federal agency employee without final funding guidance, a researcher awaiting grant approval or renewal who may need to rely on philanthropic bridge funding, or a company awaiting regulatory approvals. That new “normal” is uncertainty, and we are all learning how to operate within it and manage it as successfully as possible.

Related to that, recently NAEVR Executive Director James Jorkaskey spoke at the EuroVisionNet meeting at the European Union (EU) in Brussels (see inside story). In presenting his perspectives on United States advocacy for federal funding, Jim shared two observations about the new “normal”—that the old rules for advocacy just may not apply anymore, and that, more than ever, it isn’t over until it’s over. I thought his message was on point, and I’d like to relate his observations to you.

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Regarding the advocacy environment, as we saw in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 appropriations cycle, an eighth and final Continuing Resolution (CR) funding the government was not passed until mid-April 2012, seven months into the fiscal year. Although the President’s FY2012 budget proposal had already issued, it was difficult to focus Hill attention on an FY2012 funding level since FY2011 funding was still unknown—although the evergreen message about the return on investment at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in terms of lives saved and jobs created always applies. Additionally, since the National Eye Institute (NEI), like other government agencies, was operating at the FY2010 level, it would be difficult to characterize what key research could or could not get funded. As reported herein, despite a $6.2 million cut, the NEI expects to fund the relatively same amount of Research Project Grants (RPGs) in FY2011 as it did in past years, as well as to retain its historically higher success rate than overall NIH. This did not just happen by chance, though. NEI Director Paul Sieving, M.D., Ph.D. and his team, especially Director of Extramural Research Lore Anne McNicol, Ph.D., invested the FY2009 and FY2010 “regular” appropriations increases and two-year American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding wisely to minimize any impact of flat or reduced FY2011 funding. How long that the NEI will be able to maintain the momentum of research, especially in light of another contentious appropriations cycle in FY2012, is uncertain.

NAEVR takes its “Scorecard” issues very seriously, always wanting to facilitate additional federal funding for vision research so that it can demonstrate to constituents a return on their investment. In the “not over until it’s over” category, I am pleased that the FY2011 NEI funding reduction has been balanced by an FY2011 Peer Reviewed Medical Research-Vision (PRMR-Vision) appropriation of $4 million. As reported by the Department of Defense (DOD) representatives at the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO) 2011 Annual Meeting this past May, the final amount of FY2011 DOD funding could be higher if there is a transfer of funding from other DOD programs, as had occurred in the FY2009/2010 cycle. I encourage all interested researchers to seriously consider responding to this research funding opportunity when it issues.

Also in the “not over until it’s over” category, this edition reports on efforts by NIH Director Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D. to implement the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS), which is the centralized translational research entity recommended last December by the NIH’s Scientific Management Review Board (SMRB). NIH is currently in the process of Congressional notification about budgetary and programmatic implications, especially its plans to abolish the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR). How and when NCATS is fully implemented remains to be seen. From my experience in 2002 as a member of the IOM’s Committee on the Organizational Structure of the NIH, I can assure you that changes at NIH have far-reaching consequences, and that Congress is wise to ensure that all analyses required by the NIH Reform Act of 2006 are completed. I am pleased that both NAEVR and AEVR are engaged in Hill education about NEI’s leadership in translational research. Dr. Sieving should also be commended for hiring NEI Senior Advisor for Translational Research Matthew McMahon, Ph.D. as NEI evaluates both potential challenges and opportunities as a result of NCATS. You will see Matt in several images as he has been actively engaged with the vision community.

I appreciate your commitment to the Alliances.

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NAEVR Executive Director James Jorkaskey displays the Contributor Report while speaking at the EU in Brussels on vision research funding advocacy.