PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

It’s a Numbers Game: Gains and Losses

I want to acknowledge the tremendous loss that NAEVR/AEVR founder Stephen Ryan’s death has been for the vision community. I was fortunate to attend his funeral on May 3 with several Board members and the Alliances’ Executive Director James Jorkasky, immediately before we participated in ARVO’s 2013 Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington. As sad as it was for me personally, it was also inspirational and testimony to the rich legacy that Steve has left behind, which we all need to nurture. I will be representing the Alliances at a Memorial Scientific Meeting and Celebration of Life, to be held July 19–20 in southern California.

As much as I prefer to mention what we have gained, I must also initially recognize another loss—the $40 million reduction in Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 National Eye Institute (NEI) funding to $662.15 million, primarily due to the sequester. As reported herein, the NEI has made every effort to minimize the cut’s impact on investigator-initiated research while maintaining support for clinician scientists and scientists-in-training. I commend NEI Director Paul Sieving, M.D., Ph.D. and his team for their leadership during these challenging times. I also want to thank Dr. Sieving for keeping NEI’s focus on the forward pace of vision science through the Audacious Goals Initiative. He has been very forthcoming in explaining the initiative, its primary goal and priorities, and an implementation plan at numerous recent venues, including ARVO, the June 13 National Advisory Eye Council (NAEC) meeting, and the June 18 Focus on Eye Health National Summit.

Regarding the latter, I want to recognize NAEVR member Prevent Blindness America (PBA) for underwriting the latest study on the cost of eye and vision disorders, estimated at $139 billion, which is more than double past estimates. What we have gained are very dramatic and powerful data that NAEVR and AEVR can use in advocacy and education. In fact, between PBA’s Eyes on Capitol Hill Advocacy Day and NAEVR’s distribution of top-line results to Congressional leaders and appropriators, we are making a strong case for Congress to improve on the President’s FY2014 budget request, which has no growth in the NEI budget. After speaking with Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Tom Harkin (D-IA), I feel confident that the Senate wishes to adequately fund biomedical research to maintain its momentum and to ensure that it is not put into further jeopardy by additional sequester cuts.

The power of good cost data cannot be understated. With an investment of $10,000 in its 2012 Cost of Military Eye Injury and Blindness study, NAEVR got $10 million in FY2013 Vision Trauma Research Program (VTRP) funding for researchers, which is the highest funding level since this dedicated line in defense appropriations was established in FY2009. The study’s estimate of $25.1 billion in costs over the past decade was instrumental to NAEVR’s bipartisan supporters in the House and Senate ensuring that the line was funded—even in a Continuing Resolution. At this time, the House Appropriations Committee has approved an FY2014 bill with $10 million in VTRP funding, and NAEVR is working with its Senate champions to support it, irrespective of the legislative vehicle used to ultimately get this funding.

I wish to thank Colonel Donald Gagliano, M.D. for his past leadership of the joint Department of Defense (DOD)/Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Vision Center of Excellence (VCE). Prior to his March 31 retirement, Colonel Gagliano tirelessly educated Congress and defense colleagues about the gaps in defense-related research funding, while also doing his “day job” of developing the first-ever Defense and Veterans Eye Injury and Vision Registry, which will ultimately inform future decisions about what research is still necessary.

As we approach the official celebration of the Alliances’ 20th anniversary on October 9, I dedicate this edition of the Report to Dr. Stephen Ryan, as it reflects his vision for what the Alliances can accomplish for the vision community.