President’s Message

NIH Funding, Structural, and Translational Research
Issues Demand NAEVR’s Attention

NAEVR’s primary mission will always be to advocate for increased federal funding for vision research, primarily that at the National Eye Institute (NEI) within the National Institutes of Health (NIH) but increasingly from the Department of Defense (DOD). In that regard, NAEVR’s initial estimates, shown in the accompanying chart, reveal that vision researchers received about $56 million more in Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 funding as compared to baseline FY2009. Since FY2010 has just ended, NAEVR will further analyze NIH data to determine where vision researchers successfully competed for additional funds—such as from the NIH Common Fund or from other Institutes and Centers (I/Cs). Even prior to that update, the $56 million increase already reflects a 100-fold return on the vision community’s investment in NAEVR and AEVR.

The FY2011 appropriations process has been extremely slow, and most government agencies are operating under a Continuing Resolution (CR) until the spending bills are finalized after the election. NAEVR is already strategizing about the FY2012 appropriations process, as funding will become even tighter. Biomedical research is losing two of its most ardent champions—Senator Arlen Specter (D-PA) and Cong. David Obey (D-WI)—so new champions must be developed. NAEVR will continue to build upon the Capitol Hill relationships cultivated through the Decade of Vision 2010-2020 Initiative to make its case for robust vision funding.

NAEVR not only knows what needs to get done regarding these pivotal NIH funding, structural, and priority-setting issues—it is actively doing it now!

NIH funding is tied closely to its structure and priority-setting process, which NIH Director Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D. addressed in depth in his first appearance before the House Energy and Commerce Committee in a June 15 hearing. He used that event to publicly announce his request of the NIH’s Scientific Management Review Board (SMRB) to form a working group to make recommendations regarding a translational research strategy. The SMRB’s Translational Medicine and Therapeutics (TMAT) Working Group held its first information-gathering session in mid-September. NAEVR Executive James Jorkasky had a front-row seat and testified at the end of the two days of discussion—the only member of the audience to do so, and the only attendee to mention vision research. Jim identified numerous NEI translational research initiatives, many of which were detailed at NEI’s Translational Research and Vision meeting that is described in this edition, as is the recent NEI/Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Glaucoma Clinical Trial Design and Endpoints Symposium and AEVR’s Congressional briefing on Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD) translational research. Jim emphasized that, although a smaller Institute, the NEI has smartly and effectively expanded its research dollars through collaborations. His point was to ensure that SMRB members were informed and that vision researchers would “have a seat at the table” in an NIH strategy that could ultimately provide additional funding in key areas.

At the same meeting, the SMRB recommended that the separate Drug and Alcohol Institutes be abolished and an “Addiction” Institute be created. NAEVR testified against this move, as it had done at the SMRB’s May meeting, citing its concern that liver function research could be minimized in a combined or new Institute, just as “front of the eye” corneal research could be minimized if NEI was merged into a “Brain” Institute. NAEVR’s ardent and vocal leadership against I/C mergers/budget clusters and maintaining the NEI budget line is timely, since the newest SMRB member Harold Varmus, M.D., now National Cancer Institute (NCI) Director but former NIH Director, commented that his proposal in 2001 to consolidate NIH’s 27 I/Cs into six units “should be back on the table for consideration.” Although no SMRB members responded to that comment, it is out there and will likely make its way to the Congressional authorizers of NIH, with whom NAEVR will meet.

Clearly, under Jim’s leadership, and with the assistance of legislative counsel John Porter, NAEVR not only knows what needs to get done regarding these pivotal NIH funding, structural, and priority-setting issues—it is actively doing it now! Since this is likely the last Report before year’s end, I want to reiterate how important it is that our community fully supports the NAEVR and AEVR Alliances since, as the “Friends of the NEI,” they need to be at the forefront of these issues that affect the future of vision research.

I appreciate your commitments to NAEVR and AEVR for 2011 when renewals issue next month.

Stephen J. Ryan, M.D.
President, NAEVR/AEVR Boards
sryan@doheny.org

Contributor Report

FY2010 Vision Research Funding
Increase of $56 Million*

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Regular</em> NEI appropriations</td>
<td>$18.5 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncommitted NEI ARRA Balance</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOD Vision Research Awards</td>
<td>$11.0 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Excludes Common Fund, other I/Cs</td>
<td>$56.2 M</td>
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*Excludes $56 million coming into NIH for the Decade of Vision 2010-2020 Initiative funding.

To access the most current information and updates, please visit the NAEVR website at www.naevr.org.