Vision Community Unites to Observe World Glaucoma Week on Capitol Hill

On March 11, AEVR’s Decade of Vision Initiative united the vision community in recognizing the first World Glaucoma Week (March 7-13), as well as the third World Glaucoma Day, held March 12, 2010.

Christopher Girkin, M.D., M.S.P.H., a tenured professor of Ophthalmology and director of the University of Alabama at Birmingham Glaucoma Service in the Department of Ophthalmology at Callahan Eye Foundation Hospital, described the NEI-funded African Descent and Glaucoma Evaluation Study (ADAGES), which is designed to identify factors accounting for differences in glaucoma onset and rate of progression between individuals of African and European descent. Dr. Girkin is one of the lead investigators in this multi-center collaboration that began in 2002 and is gathering clinical information from 1,200 African American and White Americans to determine which clinical techniques can best detect damage to the optic nerve related to glaucoma. The other ADAGES clinical sites include the University of California at San Diego’s Hamilton Glaucoma Center, at which study Principal Investigators Pamela Sample, Ph.D. and Linda Zangwill, Ph.D. are located, and New York Eye and Ear Infirmary, with Jeff Liebmann, M.D.

Dr. Girkin stated that clinical observations demonstrate that Primary Open Angle Glaucoma (POAG), the most common form of the disease, appears ten years earlier in African Americans and progresses more rapidly. He noted that ethnicity is one of several risk factors for developing the disease, which include advancing age, a family history of glaucoma, long-term elevated ocular pressure, and access to healthcare—most importantly, regular eye exams. Chronic diseases, such as hypertension and diabetes, are likely to play a role as well, while the impact of environmental factors is not yet clearly understood.

Dr. Girkin explained that basic research is helping to understand the clinical observations, especially when using advanced imaging techniques, such as Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT), that can reveal damage to the optic nerve head, which is the delicate structure of ganglion cells at the very back of the optic globe. He predicted that developments in imaging will one day enable researchers to view individual cells in the eye and to determine physiological changes that could be associated with disease progression and visual impairment far earlier than currently possible. He concluded by stating that, “However, for the new technologies to be useful to provide more efficient and high quality care to at-risk minority populations, it is critical that long-term studies using these devices continue in order to determine how best to detect progressive injury in this chronic blinding disease.”

In closing comments, AEVR’s James Jorkasky directed attendees to a March 3 statement issued by the NEI for World Glaucoma Week in which its Director Paul Sieving, M.D., Ph.D., noted that NEI currently funds 181 glaucoma research projects at a total of $82.6 million.

On March 11, AEVR member Prevent Blindness America (PBA) held its Eyes on Capitol Hill Patient Advocacy Day. That evening, the vision community joined the Congressional Vision Caucus (CVC) in hosting a Capitol Hill reception.

Christopher Girkin, M.D., M.S.P.H., speaks.