With Looming Budget Cuts, Vision Research Advocacy and Education Is Vital

In early March, I was pleased to host NAEVR/AEVR Executive Director James Jorkasky here in Los Angeles. Jim was on his way to the American Glaucoma Society’s annual meeting to receive the 2011 President’s Award. I am sure that you join me in congratulating Jim on this recognition, which is noted in this report. You can also read about AEVR’s World Glaucoma Week Congressional briefing, where Jim also had his eyes imaged in real-time with Spectral Domain Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT). I want to thank Joel Schuman, M.D. (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center) for his excellent presentation on the important glaucoma and imaging research funded by the National Eye Institute (NEI).

AEVR’s Capitol Hill education under the Decade of Vision 2010–2020 Initiative also extended into the defense-related vision research arena with a briefing on Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)-related visual dysfunction. Both Randy Kardon, M.D., Ph.D. (University of Iowa) and Stacey Choi, Ph.D. (New England College of Optometry) spoke about the diagnosis of TBI, with an emphasis on the translation of their research into battlefield-ready diagnostic instruments. AEVR’s education supported NAEVR’s request for Peer Reviewed Medical Research-Vision (PRMR-Vision) funding at $10 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2012.

NAEVR now spends equal time advocating for defense-related vision research funding as it does for National Institutes of Health (NIH) and NEI funding. Not only did vision researchers receive $24 million in Department of Defense (DOD) awards in FY2010 from PRMR-Vision and the Defense Medical Research and Development Program (DMRDP), but these awards may be the only new source of vision research dollars. As you will read on the back page, NAEVR member Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) has been instrumental in securing support by the Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) in their FY2102 Independent Budget request to Congress for increased vision research funding at DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The FY2010 DOD funding, coupled with increased “regular” NEI appropriations and the remaining balance of the $175 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding for NEI, resulted in nearly $90 million more for vision research in FY2010 over baseline FY2009 funding. That is 150-times our community’s investment in the Alliances!

Fast forward to first-quarter 2011, however, and the research funding outlook becomes significantly less positive. Despite a $1 billion NIH increase proposed in the President’s FY2011 budget, Congress was unable to pass any funding bills, so it has kept the government running through a series of Continuing Resolutions (CR) that fund most programs at the FY2010 level. In early February, the new House Republican leadership proposed a CR to finalize FY2011 that would cut NIH funding to the FY2008 level. That measure failed, and I was pleased that, in late January, ARVO’s Annual Meeting Program Committee educated Congressional offices about the impact of such cuts and delayed appropriations.

Although the President has proposed an FY2012 NIH inflationary funding increase of $745 million over the FY2010 level, his proposal has already been met with severe criticism by most Republicans and some Democrats in Congress, which ultimately controls the budget process. With the looming budget cuts, vision research advocacy and education is more important than ever. But NAEVR’s advocacy is not just confined to funding issues. NAEVR has been vigilant in its opposition to potential changes in NIH’s structure that could cluster the NEI budget into a “Brain” Institute, from which NEI was essentially spun off 42 years ago. And NAEVR has also expressed concern that, if NIH creates a centralized translational research entity, it not constrain NEI’s creativity. In the past, NEI has smartly and effectively expanded upon its limited research dollars through innovative partnerships that has made it a leader in translational research, as acknowledged by NIH Director Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D.

I appreciate your commitments to NAEVR and AEVR for 2011, and I urge your responsiveness when NAEVR alerts you to contact Congress in support of vision research funding.

Stephen J. Ryan, M.D.
President, NAEVR/AEVR Boards
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FY2010 Vision Research Funding Increase of $88 Million*

*Over Baseline FY2009

DOD DMRDP Awards
13.0M

DOD PRMR-Vision Awards
11.0M

Other NIH Institutes/Centers
20.0M

Uncommitted ARRA Balance
26.7M

“Regular” NEI appropriations
18.5M

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National Alliance For Eye And Vision Research
Alliance For Eye And Vision Research

Contributor Report

President’s Message

Winter/Spring 2011

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