PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE
2013—A Year of Celebration, Change, and Challenge

I am pleased to communicate with you through my first President’s Message since having been elected as NAEVR and AEVR President in early March. I am both honored and humbled by the Boards’ support and realize that I have an important legacy to continue—of Dr. Stephen Ryan. After founding the Alliances and serving as their President for 20 years, Steve stepped down in early 2013. As my first official action, I offered up resolutions unanimously adopted by each Board commending Dr. Ryan for his tireless service. (See box right)

I am excited to be leading the Alliances at such an important time in their history, as well as during their time of greatest vision research funding challenges. With this edition of the Report, we are officially starting the 20th anniversary celebration, which includes a number of events and deliverables, all of which focus on the Alliances’ message about the value of federally funded vision research. The centerpiece will be a July 9 AEVR Capitol Hill reception (see box below) featuring National Eye Institute (NEI) Director Paul Sieving, M.D., Ph.D., whom we have asked to speak about NEI’s Challenge to Identify Audacious Goals in Vision Research and Blindness Rehabilitation. In late February, I attended the NEI’s Audacious Goals Development meeting, along with several other NAEVR Board members and Executive Director Jim Jorkasky, and am excited about how this bold initiative enhances NEI’s mission of saving and restoring vision. Obviously, research funding will likely be this initiative’s greatest challenge.

Even with the leadership change, the work of the Alliances has continued unimpeded by Jim and Director of Advocacy and Education David Epstein. This Report documents their work in first-quarter 2013, which consisted primarily of advocacy with Congress to avoid the most negative impacts of the sequester, finalize Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 appropriations, and seek adequate funding for vision research in FY2014 appropriations.

Despite the medical research community’s ongoing efforts, which included NAEVR member letters to Congressional leaders and a February 7 ARVO Advocacy Day devoted to the implications for vision research, the President ordered the sequester on March 1 after Congress failed to act to avoid it. The six-month Continuing Resolution (CR) that Congress passed to finalize FY2013 appropriations also contains the sequester cuts—$1.6 billion to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and $36 million to NEI. As NIH Director Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D. has consistently cautioned, these cuts will have their greatest impact on new grants and young investigators. He stated at a March 5 hearing of the House Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) Appropriations Subcommittee that, “I lament the budget’s impact on young investigators and whether they will have a career path that keeps them in research.” That same Subcommittee, which has already begun the FY2014 appropriations process, also selected NAEVR to testify at a March 13 Public Witness hearing, along with the Coalition for Usher Syndrome Research and Helen Keller National Center—three vision groups among the 24 witnesses selected out of 150 groups that submitted requests. Wilmer’s Hendrick Scholl, M.D. testified for NAEVR, which was propitious since his research focuses on retinal degenerations, including age-related macular degeneration (AMD), which Subcommittee Chair Jack Kingston (R-GA) noted was the cause of his father’s vision loss.

I do have positive spending news—the CR that finalizes FY2013 included the full House Defense bill language, meaning that the Department of Defense’s (DOD) Vision Trauma Research Program (VTRP) will be funded at the precedent-setting level of $10 million, minus the eight percent sequester cut netting $9.2 million. This funding not only partially makes up for the NEI cut, it establishes a new baseline for NAEVR’s FY2014 advocacy. NAEVR will alert the community to the Program Announcement that issues seeking grant submissions, as well as educate researchers at its May 6 Defense-Related Vision Research Opportunities Session at the ARVO Annual Meeting in Seattle.

I appreciate the commitment of time and financial support from the Alliances’ members. Feel free to email me with any comments or observations.

Peter J. McDonnell, M.D.
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WINTER | SPRING 2013

Peter McDonnell, M.D.

The Alliances’ Boards commend Stephen Ryan, M.D., who has served as the AEVR and NAEVR Founder and served as its President until 2013, the Alliances’ 20th anniversary year. We recognize his tireless commitment to NAEVR’s and AEVR’s mission of advocacy and education on behalf of the value of vision research and its benefits for patients, as well as his strong leadership in building Alliances that are respected for their efforts by Congress, the Administration, coalition partners, and the vision community.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

AEVR 20th Anniversary Congressional Reception
July 9, 2013 Rayburn Foyer
Featuring NEI Director Paul Sieving, M.D., Ph.D.