

## **Founding of the National Eye Institute (NEI)**

Many members may not be aware of the critical role that the Association of University Professors of Ophthalmology (AUPO) played in creating the National Eye Institute (NEI). David F. Weeks, former Chair and CEO at Research to Prevent Blindness (RPB), was a participant in the efforts to create the NEI and provided AUPO with details of its establishment. He states that “in the early 1960s RPB’s trustees made the commitment to try to convince the government to separate ophthalmology from the National Institute for Neurological Diseases and Blindness. The task took several years because of strenuous opposition from the Johnson administration.”

To strengthen this proposal, RPB organized a series of science writer seminars to educate the public regarding eye diseases that cause blindness. RPB commissioned the American Institute of Public Opinion to conduct a Gallup Poll. The results indicated that the American people feared blindness more than any other disability and that, with the exception of cancer, it was more feared than any other malady that could befall them. An extensive scientific survey in late 1962 by Dr. Thomas Duane, head of Ophthalmology at Jefferson Medical College, documented the lack of researchers, funding, facilities and equipment involved in eye research. The survey entitled “Ophthalmic Research USA” recommended creation of a national eye institute and upgrading ophthalmology from divisional status to departmental status in U.S. medical schools because half of eye units at that time were divisions of surgical departments.

A bill to establish a national eye institute initiated by Fred Rooney, a Pennsylvania congressman, never cleared committee due to the lack of a scientific organization’s endorsement. Among the organizations that declined to support RPB’s quest were the American Medical Association (AMA), the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology and the Association for Research in Ophthalmology (forerunner of ARVO). An important reason for the creation of AUPO was to provide scientific endorsement for the formation of the National Eye Institute. The bill was re-introduced in 1967 for the 90<sup>th</sup> session of Congress. At a committee hearing, testifiers included Jules Stein, an American physician and businessman, and AUPO members: David Cogan (Harvard), Thomas Duane (Jefferson Medical College), Michael Hogan (University of California, San Francisco), Herbert Kaufman (University of Florida), Edward Maumenee (Johns Hopkins), Frank Newell (University of Chicago), and Bradley Straatsma (University of California, Los Angeles). The bill passed both Houses on the last day of the 90<sup>th</sup> session of Congress. After a personal visit with Jules Stein, President Johnson signed a bill creating the National Eye Institute on August 16, 1968. Since 1968, Congress has appropriated more than \$15.5 billion in support of the NEI’s programs to preserve vision and restore sight.