Introducing David Epstein, the 2013 Recipient of the Weisenfeld Award

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I am honored to introduce David Epstein as the recipient of the 2013 Mildred Weisenfeld award. As many ARVO members know well, this award is bestowed on its recipient for recognition of distinguished scholarly contributions to the clinical practice of ophthalmology. David Epstein surely has earned the credentials, which entitle him to this high honor. He is a renowned glaucoma clinician-scientist who has made seminal contributions to our profession in several key areas; namely, fundamental basic science as a researcher, research mentoring, education and training of residents and fellows, administrative management, and health care policy at the University and national level. However, it is worth noting that Mildred Weisenfeld, who founded Fight for Sight in 1946 and was afflicted with retinitis pigmentosa, felt that her greatest impact in the field of Ophthalmology was very simply, to encourage research and researchers. On this basis alone, ARVO could not have chosen a better representative who embodies those goals than David Epstein.

As a research leader and mentor, David has formed a group of basic scientists and MD clinician-scientists at Duke to create a critical mass for translational science. He has been a major advocate for an additional year of glaucoma research training for glaucoma fellows, and more recently for training accomplished by National Eye Institute (NEI) grant mechanisms. Spending an additional year of training, or any amount of training, with David is an investment in one's career that is unquestionably rewarding and priceless. But the benefits extend in both directions. David is most proud of the students and fellows he trained both at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary and Duke which include: Doug Johnson, Rand Allingham, Choka Melamed, Joel Schuman, Paul Lee, Bob Allen, Mark Latina, Janey Wiggs, and others, including basic scientists like John Anderson, Kristine Erickson Lamy, Pedro Gonzalez, Terete Borras, Vasanth Rao, Paloma Liton, Mark Johnson, Ross Ethier, and Dan Stamer. David trained the above students and fellows in the best Socratic tradition, and it carries on in his most successful accomplishment. Mildred Weisenfeld would be beaming right now if she were here to learn of this remarkable training record and the meaning it has to David, who has been an inspirational and superb mentor to so many of us.

As a researcher, David is highly unusual in that he was continuously funded by the National Eye Institute with an RO1 grant on the “metabolism of the trabecular meshwork” for over 32 years despite his multiple administrative responsibilities. The initial goal was to understand how normal aqueous outflow is regulated, what may be abnormal in glaucoma, and insights into novel therapy. He has a track record of facilitating the careers of many scientists as we have noted, who initially were recruited to work on David’s RO1, learn glaucoma, and then spin out to their own individual grants. Studies of trabecular meshwork metabolism eventually led to the discovery of the important role of rho kinase. This subsequently led to the creation of Aerie Pharmaceuticals, which is a perfect exemplification of how academia and biotechnology can be successfully accomplished in a university setting in order to capitalize on the intellectual property coming out of David’s laboratories, which may lead to new therapy for glaucoma.

As an educator, David has consistently tried to translate the best in science to gain knowledge about disease mechanisms with the goal of novel therapy. He exemplifies the legacy of Morton Grant by conducting laboratory-based research both in vitro and in living animals to try to understand pathogenic mechanisms of human glaucoma for open angle glaucoma as well as the secondary glaucomas including pigmentary, malignant, and pseudoxfolliation. David is deeply committed to physiology as the cornerstone of pathophysiology and is a strong propostion of phenotype as the perfect partner to genotype in order to gain insights into disease mechanism.

As Chairman of Duke’s Ophthalmology Department from 1992 to 1999, he oversaw both the increase of both the clinical and basic science faculty from 12 to 70 current members. His department has been highly successful and has enjoyed 6-fold growth in clinical revenue over the past two decades with also an overall 6-fold budget increase ($56M; $57M clinical, $19M research). Most importantly, he has been highly successful in raising funds for a new $26.5M building (Albert Eye Research Institute, opened in 2005), and he has also grown the endowment from $6M to $64M during his tenure. The Duke Eye Center has also just broken ground on a $68M new clinical building. The Duke Department of Ophthalmology has been consistently ranked in the top 10 nationally by United States News and World Report (currently ranked number 7).

David has also distinguished himself for service at the national level. David served as Trustee for Association of University Professors of Ophthalmology from 2007 to 2011 and was its President (2011–2012). He served as President of ARVO from 1992 to 1993.

It is my hope that the ARVO membership now has a little more insight into why the 2013 Mildred Weisenfeld award has gone to such a deserving candidate, who I am honored to call my friend and mentor. Please join me in congratulating David Epstein, the 2013 Mildred Weisenfeld Awardee for his well-deserved recognition and receipt of this high honor.