A Brief History of the Bressler Prize and Symposium

Recognizing Excellence in Vision Care and Vision Science

Alan R. Morse, JD, PhD

From its founding in 1914 as a provider of residential and social services for blind children, The Jewish Guild for the Blind (The Guild) has evolved into the largest provider of vision-related health, educational, rehabilitation, and social services in the country. Each year, more than 15,000 patients, students, clients, and others, ranging from the youngest infants to the frailest elderly persons, and their family members receive services and support from The Guild. Many services of The Guild are unique and address the needs of exceptional segments of the visually impaired and blind community, especially those with other comorbidities, including mental health, developmental disabilities, AIDS, and other conditions that contribute significantly to the burden of vision loss.

The Bressler Prize and Symposium (also known as “the Bressler”) were created by The Guild to honor and memorialize Alfred W. Bressler, Esq, a distinguished New York attorney with a great interest in vision impairment, and to recognize his generous support of The Guild during his lifetime and through provisions made through his estate. The Bressler Prize recognizes an established professional in the field of vision science whose leadership, research, and service have resulted in important advancements in the treatment of eye disease or rehabilitation of persons with vision loss and whose further work is expected to contribute significantly.

The Bressler Symposium formally recognizes the prize recipient and is conducted in the fall of each year. During the 7 years of existence of the Bressler, more than 3 dozen leading clinicians and scientists from around the world, in addition to the prize recipients, have presented their work and provided a cutting-edge review of state-of-the-art knowledge.

From its inception, the Bressler was designed to recognize excellence that had not been adequately acknowledged, although each of the Bressler Prize recipients’ work was well known and highly regarded. This criterion, the superb contributions of each of the prize recipients, and the professional standing of the selection committee members have contributed to the rapidly growing prestige of the prize. The Bressler Prize recipients have received significant additional accolades subsequent to their recognition by the Bressler Prize selection committee, providing testament to the success of the prize in fulfilling its original intent. Each year, the Bressler Prize recipient is invited to join the selection committee, contributing new wisdom and fresh insight to the committee deliberations. The original committee members who remain today are Daniel M. Albert, MD, MS, Stanley Chang, MD, John T. Flynn, MD, Alan R. Morse, JD, PhD, and Paul A. Sieving, MD, PhD. In addition, John G. Clarkson, MD, Richard M. Hill, OD, PhD, J. Anthony Movshon, PhD, Ronald E. Smith, MD, J. Wayne Streilein, MD, and Joseph B. Walsh, MD, were members of the original selection committee.

The Bressler Prize recipient for 2009 is Roy W. Beck, MD, PhD, for his work performing and collaborating on landmark investigations involving the retina, cornea, and nervous systems in children and...
adults. Dr Beck was the director of the Optic Neuritis Treatment Trial, the first major clinical trial in neuro-ophthalmology, and he changed the approach to optic neuritis and early intervention in patients at risk for multiple sclerosis. He is the founder and executive director of the Jaeb Center for Health Research, established in 1993 as a freestanding nonprofit coordinating center for multicenter clinical trials and epidemiologic research. The Jaeb Center for Health Research coordinates 3 National Institutes of Health–funded multicenter clinical research networks: the Diabetes Research in Children Network, which investigates the potential use of glucose-monitoring technology to improve the management of type 1 diabetes mellitus and to develop a better understanding of hypoglycemia and its prevention; the Diabetic Retinopathy Clinical Research Net, which supports the identification, design, and implementation of multicenter clinical research initiatives focused on diabetes-induced retinal disorders; and the Pediatric Eye Disease Investigator Group, which has established itself as a model for the efficient recruitment and care of pediatric eye disorders, such as strabismic and refractive amblyopia, esotropia, and nasolacrimal duct obstruction.

Dr Beck’s interest and work in diabetes was the focus of the 2009 Bressler Symposium, which included presentations by Susan B. Bressler, MD, Neil M. Bressler, MD (neither of whom was related to Alfred W. Bressler), Lloyd Paul Aiello, MD, PhD, and Thomas Gardner, MD, in addition to Dr Beck, who also moderated the symposium. Mark Kupersmith, MD, introduced Dr Beck.

Past Bressler Prize recipients and the work for which they were recognized are described in the following paragraphs:

Richard A. Lewis, MD, MS (2003), for his extraordinary contributions to a molecular genetic understanding of inherited vision disorders, including mapping and identifying some of the first genes for inherited eye disorders, establishing a role for gene modifiers in inherited glaucoma, and providing evidence for a novel form of triallelic inheritance in Bardet-Biedl syndrome.

Robert W. Massof, PhD, and Eliezer Peli, OD, MSc (2004), for their work in low vision rehabilitation, which has largely defined the field. Dr Massof wrote a seminal article mathematically modeling the time course of visual field loss in retinitis pigmentosa and 2 highly influential articles demonstrating that rehabilitation medicine concepts could and should be applied to low vision rehabilitation. Dr Peli’s contributions include quantitative evaluation of retinal imaging, development of a widely used definition of contrast in complex images, invention of many low vision rehabilitation devices, and development of the concept of visual multiplexing.

Burton Kushner, MD (2005), for his work on strabismus and binocular vision. Among his contributions, Dr Kushner has developed many surgical techniques in widespread use and has made numerous seminal contributions to the proper diagnosis and rehabilitation of patients with exotropia, bilateral fourth nerve palsy, dissociated vertical deviation, and other complex visual problems.

Lois E. H. Smith, MD, PhD (2006), for developing the mouse model of retinopathy of prematurity, a model that has been critical to more fully understanding the disease process and facilitating testing of new drugs, developing a time course of vascular endothelial growth factor and protein expression, and developing the association between ischemia-induced retinopathy and vascular endothelial growth factor and identifying 2 separate regulatory pathways that control proliferative retinopathy.

David R. Williams, PhD (2007), for producing groundbreaking work in physiologic optics. He has demonstrated that the distribution of blue-sensitive photoreceptors in the retina mediates blue sensitivity and that such receptors are absent in the fovea. He also articulated that 2 separately fatigable neural mechanisms represent cardinal directions of color space, how optics and neural factors combine to set limits on visual resolution, and the spacing, orientation, and regularity of photoreceptors in various regions of the human retina. His work on adaptive optics and wavefront sensing has led to major advances in diagnostic instrumentation and vision corrective surgery.

Jonathan C. Horton, MD, PhD (2008), for producing groundbreaking work in the understanding of key concepts in the clinical neurosciences. Two of his articles, one about anisometropia-induced amblyopia and another about patterns of ocular dominance columns in the human cortex, are classics in the modern neuroscience literature. His more recent work continues to explore the neurologic foundations of strabismus and to devise better ways to prevent and treat vision loss from amblyopia and strabismus.

In its brief 7-year history, through its Bressler Prize and Symposium, The Guild has recognized some of the luminaries in vision science and vision care. There are numerous prizes in ophthalmology; in designing the criteria for the Bressler Prize, we tried to address what we believe to be a gap in the array of extant awards. It is our hope that the future recipients will be at least as worthy and that the prize recipients will continue their work to aid in the understanding of and battle against vision loss.

Submitted for Publication: November 27, 2009; final revision received November 27, 2009; accepted December 1, 2009.

Correspondence: Alan R. Morse, JD, PhD, The Jewish Guild for the Blind, 15 W 65th St, New York, NY 10023 (armorse@jgb.org).

Financial Disclosure: None reported.