



## YEARS OF HOPE: *Expanding Knowledge, Building the Field*

**F**ew people realized it at the time, but 1981 was a landmark year for the future of aging in America, due primarily to a visionary physician ... and fruit flies.

Thirty-five years ago, Irving S. Wright, M.D., convened a group of leading aging researchers at the annual meeting of the American College of Physicians in New Orleans and founded the American Federation for Aging Research. The mission from the beginning was to fund and nurture talented scientists and physicians and encourage them to pursue lifelong careers in research focused on aging processes and age-related diseases.

AFAR emerged at a time when public perception on aging was fueled by years of late-night television commercials for “miracle cures,” and the field was not only perceived as “anti-aging” but also the province of charlatans and quacks.

“At the time AFAR got started, I think it would be fair to say that most people in both the scientific and medical communities did not regard aging research as a serious scientific endeavor,” says Harvey J. Cohen, M.D., president of AFAR’s Board of Directors and the Walter Kempner Professor of Medicine and Director of the Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development at Duke University. “I think AFAR took up the challenge when few others were trying to inject real science into the study of aging at every level.”



AFAR began raising crucial financial support for research focused on the basic biological processes of aging, an area that then had precious few champions. At the same time, the organization committed financial support, as well as mentorship and networking opportunities, to develop a cadre of academic physician-scientists.

“Up until the period when AFAR was created, there really was very little attention put specifically on understanding what it is about getting older that makes us vulnerable to disease and what we can do to keep people healthy as long as possible,” says Kevin J. Lee, Ph.D., AFAR board member, Executive Director of the Lawrence Ellison Foundation, and Senior Scientific & Programmatic Advisor of the Glenn Foundation for Medical Research.

In 1981, that understanding received a major boost, and also revealed a glimpse of the field’s future, when a team of scientists published the first in a series of studies that showed that the effects of aging can be delayed in fruit fly populations through selective breeding in the laboratory. This groundbreaking basic research on fruit flies, along with studies on yeast, worms, mice, opossums, and other mammals, has since played a key role in scientific breakthroughs in the quest to delay the effects of aging—fueling the hope that what was discovered in the lab would one day have applications in humans.

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President - AFAR Board of Directors

## EARLY MOMENTUM

By 1982, AFAR had awarded its first grants to five promising researchers. By the end of that decade, AFAR had awarded nearly 200 grants.

“What AFAR chose as its mission was really the most difficult thing, which is supporting research that doesn’t have an obvious and immediate application to humans, but that ultimately would lead to it,” says Steven N. Austad, Ph.D., the Scientific Director of AFAR. “Over the years, AFAR has supported a lot of research on things like fruit flies that are very, very difficult to raise funds for; however, what you find in fruit flies turns out to have a lot to say about human aging”

And through career development programs, such as the Paul B. Beeson Career Development Awards in Aging Research and the Medical Student Training in Aging Research (MSTAR) program, AFAR has provided research support, critical mentorship, and networking opportunities to young, clinically trained investigators.

“AFAR’s concentration on young investigators, in my view, has paid off,” says George M. Martin, M.D., AFAR’s Scientific Director Emeritus and Professor of Pathology Emeritus at the University of Washington. “It’s given an opportunity to young people to get a start.”

Having served as both a Beeson and MSTAR mentor, Dr. Cohen agrees: “AFAR has really helped over the years to build a critical base of people who are now seen as serious clinician–investigators in the area of geriatrics and gerontology—something that essentially didn’t exist 20 years ago.”

