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Introduction

The European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA) and the European Lung Foundation (ELF) identified obstacles for patients requiring oxygen during air travel within the European Union. As a result, the situation was analysed to provide insight to the experiences of patients requiring oxygen, the requirements for these passengers prior to booking a flight and the changes needed from airlines and authorities to enable air travel with oxygen for all in order to eliminate discrimination and exploitation of EU citizens.



“...the steward on the plane wanted me to turn off my machine on take-off and landing. I explained to her that it was not oxygen but a concentrator, so she had to ask the pilot. He seemed to know about it so everything was ok... When I travelled back from Brussels another steward said I should have booked a ticket for the machine. I thought he was joking but no, he was serious.

” Betty Sutton, Ireland

Objectives

1. Understand the current situation of people with a need for oxygen during air travel
2. Collect testimonies from patients who encountered problems during air travel
3. Assess airline policies to understand the different airline rules for traveling with oxygen
4. Evaluate patient testimonies and airline policies to identify main issues
5. Recommend solutions and inform patients accordingly

Methodology

The project consisted of a qualitative exercise based on publically available information and first-hand accounts from victims of ongoing discriminatory practices in Europe with the following as most important methods for information collection:

1. A template was sent to patients to share testimonies of discrimination during air travel with oxygen from February until June 2013
2. Assessment of airline policies using the ELF airline index and by checking each airline booking system. Where information was not publically available, such as the price of using oxygen for air travel, EFA made phone calls to airlines for clarifications.

Acknowledgements

We greatly appreciate the contributions of the individual patients who shared their stories to make this booklet possible. In addition, EFA wishes to recognize the commitment of the Member of European Parliament Keith Taylor for providing a foreword for the booklet. We also appreciate the recognition to support EFA's work against discrimination for chronic patients in a need to travel with oxygen by European Commissioner for Health Tonio Borg at Bad Hofgastein in 2013.

Results

1. Discriminatory practices are persistent among many of the major European commercial airlines which opt to charge for the use of oxygen

- People requiring the use of oxygen when they travel can be charged up to 7x the price of the same round trip airfare for a standard passenger
- The same flat rates are usually charged for intercontinental and continental flights
- A minority of airlines do not charge for the use of oxygen and even offer it free (e.g. ~~British Airways, Air Baltic, Air Malta~~)

2. European airlines each have different Medical Information for Fitness to Travel (MEDIF) forms

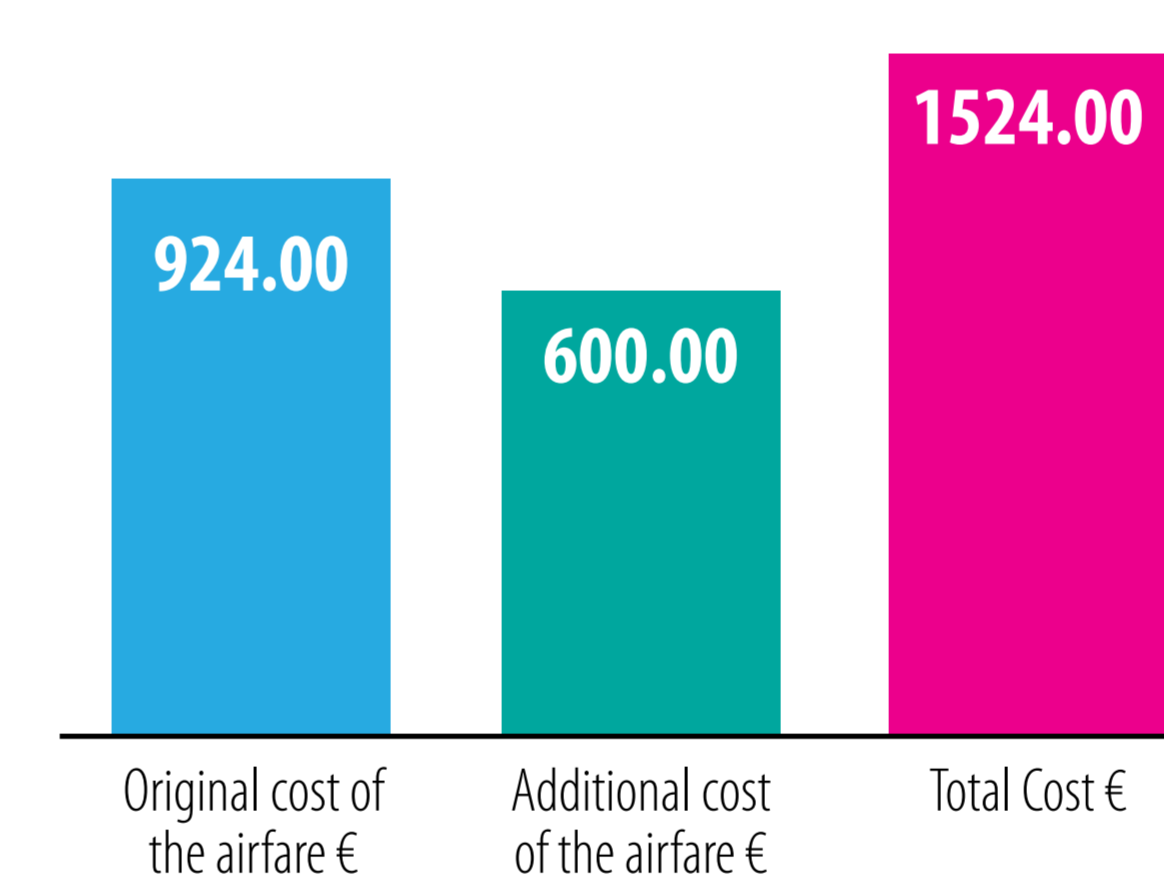
- Different approval periods for completing MEDIF forms make it confusing and difficult for people requiring oxygen to confidently make travel reservations in a timely manner
- The lack of a single European MEDIF form causes extra work for healthcare professionals as different forms may request different information or have different approval periods

3. Some cabin crews of European airlines are inadequately trained on how to assist passengers requiring the use of oxygen

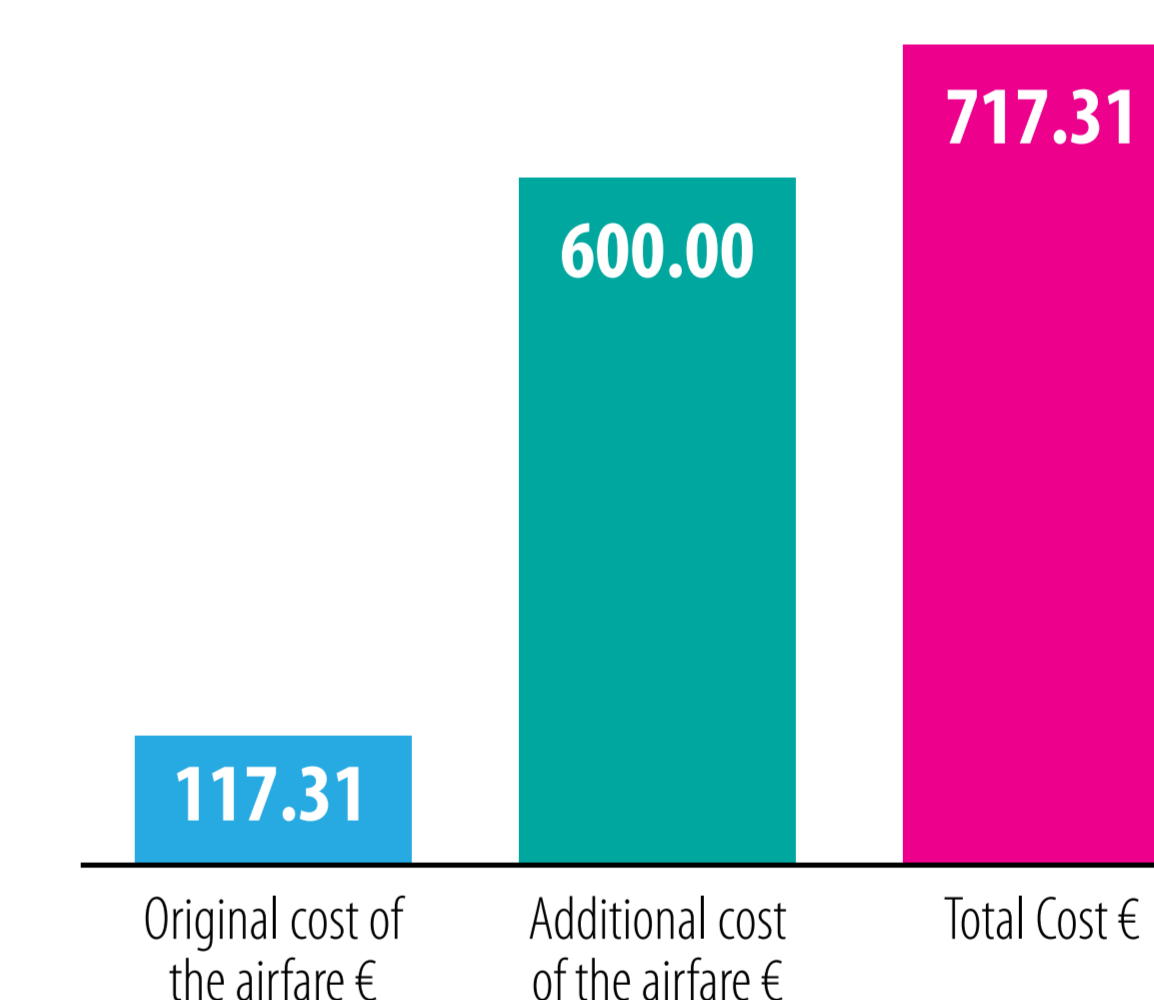
- Patient testimonials revealed unacceptable requests were made from cabin crews to passengers requiring oxygen
- Without one properly trained cabin crew member, misunderstandings and mistakes are more likely to occur resulting in stressful and unnecessary costs for passengers

4. Most airlines permit the use of personal Portable Oxygen Concentrators (POCs) on-board aircraft during the entirety of the flight; approved devices are normally listed

Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro with TAP



Lisbon to Brussels with TAP



Source: Enabling Air Travel with Oxygen, 2013, page 51.

Conclusions

As a consequence of our results we request:

- Airlines should complement the need for oxygen with their supply free of charge either as a Portable Oxygen Concentrator (POC) or as a tank with oxygen if needed due to low temperatures
- Airlines should offer transport for an empty oxygen tank in the cargo hold and a POC as well as the required amount of batteries free of charge, which once in the cabin passengers should be permitted to use at any time until leaving the aircraft
- All airlines should accept one single set of Medical Information for Fitness to Travel or Special Assistance (MEDIF) forms as suggested by IATA
- Oxygen tank stations should be provided at airports so disembarking passengers asking for oxygen therapy can refill their oxygen tanks upon arrival
- Approval by airlines for the use of permitted personal devices or oxygen supplied by the airline itself should be granted within a 48 hour time period after a request is made
- All airlines should require ground staff as well as cabin crews to participate in a frequently repeated training module on how to accommodate for passengers with a need for oxygen

As a next step in its push for change, EFA invited CEOs of the European airlines included in this review for a meeting in October 2014 to discuss and request a solution of the current situation.