

Air travel for patients requiring oxygen should be facilitated, not hindered

On the World COPD Day, EFA calls on European air travel authorities to rule on the use of medical oxygen on airports and plane cabins

November 19, World COPD Day, Brussels – More than 3.5 million people need medical oxygen in Europe (1) and many are advised by their doctors to move to regions with temperate climates that will ease the symptoms of their disease. However the free movement of people around the EU Member States is a nightmare for severe respiratory patients. The European Federation of Allergy, Asthma and Airways Diseases Patients' Organisations (EFA) has documented that air travelling with oxygen is in many cases unaffordable and too complicated for individual patients to try.

Medical oxygen is a common therapy among chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (2), severe asthma, cystic fibrosis, pulmonary fibrosis and lung cancer patients that have attained a severe degree of the disease. The current EU regulation (3) allows air travel with medical oxygen equipment but the oxygen itself is currently provided by airlines as a complementary service for passengers. In an effort to document the discrimination suffered by severe respiratory patients when air travelling in Europe, EFA published the booklet "Enabling Air Travel with Oxygen in Europe" (4), in collaboration with the European Lung Foundation (ELF) (5). The booklet shows how certain airlines charge up to 7 times more for travelling with medical oxygen, when compared with flight tickets of a standard passenger.

The burden is not just economic. Severe respiratory patients requiring oxygen therapy, such as COPD or severe asthma patients, have to deal with unnecessary stress when travelling. Individual airline policies make it difficult to arrange oxygen to enable them travelling safely because medical forms and certificates differ from one company to another. Patients have declared that the connection between the airport entrance, safety check and the flight gate can be long and complicated without properly trained staff and specialized assistance. The possibility to find medical oxygen in airports is something patients cannot rely on in case of an emergency providing no guarantee for patients to enable no oxygen gap from airport check-in to aircraft cabin and back.

On the World COPD Day (6), EFA President Breda Flood declared: *"We are providing information about air travel to our network of patients' organisations. However, it is not easy to encourage patients requiring oxygen to live active lives and to travel when we witness obstacles on the ground. We call on airlines and airport authorities to assimilate their policies to enable patients requiring oxygen to travel safely"*.

Member of the European Parliament Pablo Echenique (Spain, GUE-NGL) (7) declared: *"Being a disabled person myself, the inconvenience, some would call it torture, that people with special needs have to withstand when travelling by plane are not unknown to me. In the case of people needing medical oxygen, the discrimination is aggravated by them paying for an essential, life-saving service. It is about time that the European Union forced air companies to put passenger rights before their own economic interests and not the other way round"*.

EFA and its members have requested the air operators involved to use the form by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) (8) and offer oxygen in-cabin at an affordable cost.

PRESS RELEASE



Notes to editors:

- (1) EFA calculations based on the latest World Health Organisation, European Respiratory Society and other medical sources.
- (2) According to the European Respiratory Society (ERS), Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is characterised by persistent airflow limitation that is usually progressive and associated with a chronic inflammatory response in the airways and lungs to noxious particles or gases. It results from a combination of diffuse small airway disease and destruction of the lung tissue (emphysema).
- (3) The EC Regulation 1107/2006 on the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air foresees non-discriminatory access to air travel and free of charge transport of mobility equipment (max. 2 items) and medical equipment with a 48 hours pre-notification.
- (4) EFA Booklet reflects the situation of 2013. Some airlines have changed their policies since the publication of the booklet: <http://www.efanet.org/enabling-air-travel-with-oxygen-in-europe-an-efa-booklet-for-patients-with-chronic-respiratory-diseases/>
- (5) European Lung Foundation website: <http://www.europeanlung.org/en>
- (6) The World COPD Day is an annual awareness-raising event organized and sponsored by the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (GOLD). For more information please visit <http://www.goldcopd.org/wcd-home.html>
- (7) MEP Pablo Echenique website: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/125036/PABLO_ECHENIQUE_home.html
- (8) IATA form: <http://www.iata.org/whatwedo/safety/health/Documents/medical-manual-2013.pdf> (pp 67-70)

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The European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA) is a non-profit network of allergy, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD) patients organisations, representing 35 national associations in 22 countries and over 400,000 patients. EFA is dedicated to making Europe a place where people with allergies, asthma and COPD have the right to best quality of care and safe environment, live uncompromised lives and are actively involved in all decisions influencing their health. Visit www.efanet.org for more information.