

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT INTEREST GROUP ON ALLERGY AND ASTHMA

LAUNCH REPORT



Event hosted by: Sirpa PIETIKÄINEN (MEP) and Nessa CHILDERS (MEP)

Event organised by: European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) and European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA)

25th March, 2015

Allergy knows no boundaries and affects people of all ages

Over 150 million EU citizens live with allergies. The severity of the disease varies from person to person and can range from minor irritation to full anaphylactic shock — a life-threatening reaction. Around 30 million people in Europe have asthma and as many as 6 million of these people suffer from severe symptoms. Furthermore, the prevalence of these diseases is growing at a dramatic rate and the current prediction is that by 2025 more than 50% of the European population will be allergic.

Allergy and asthma are amongst the most prevalent chronic diseases in Europe although many patients do not report their symptoms or are not correctly diagnosed. It is estimated that 45% of patients have never received an allergy diagnosis. Indirect costs for insufficiently treated allergy in the EU range between 55 billion and 151 billion Euro per year, while an average yearly savings of 142 billion Euro could be realised if patients were treated appropriately with available cost-effective treatments.

To raise awareness of allergy and asthma as highly prevalent chronic diseases, as well as to foster European research on allergic diseases, share best practices and promote allergy and asthma health in all policies, the European Parliament has launched an Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma, under the chairmanship of the Member of the European Parliament Sirpa Pietikäinen (Finland, European People's Party).

The Interest Group is an informal group of Members of the European Parliament committed to improve the health and quality of life of patients with asthma and allergy in Europe and to prevent the onset of these diseases for future generations.

The European Commission health-related services, Member States health and research attachés, industry representatives, patients groups, academia and the public health community in general will be the key contributors to the Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma.

The Secretariat of the Interest Group is run by the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) and the European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA) and will work closely to voice the needs of people living with allergy and asthma.

The launch of the group took place on the 25th of March, 2015 in the European Parliament. The event was co-hosted by the Interest Group Chair, MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen, together with supporting MEP Nessa Childers (Ireland, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats). The event was attended by approximately thirty participants, including 5 Members of the European Parliament/assistants, representatives of the European Commission, World Health Organisation, academia, industry and patients' representatives. The event included presentations on the prevalence and the burden of allergy and asthma, example of best practice on allergy at the national level, and was followed by a moderated panel discussion between key policymakers, academia and patients' groups.

“The European Parliament Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma is to deal holistically and systematically with allergy and asthma at EU level”, MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen

The meeting was opened by Sirpa Pietikäinen (Finland, European People’s Party), a Member of the European Parliament and a member of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI).



For Sirpa Pietikäinen, the policy response to reduce allergy and asthma should focus on chemicals’ exposure and healthy air quality

In her welcoming speech, Mrs Pietikäinen, the Chair of the Interest Group, expressed her enthusiasm about the establishment of the group. She highlighted that it is an important step towards ensuring quality care for allergy and asthma patients in Europe, as it will help moving towards the establishment of national and EU-wide strategies to tackle the root causes of these diseases, foster research and improve prevention and care. Mrs Pietikäinen also noted that the challenges posed by allergy and asthma should be tackled in a holistic way, and thus the policy response should include several elements, such as prevention, early diagnosis, rehabilitation, access to medication, reduction of chemicals’ exposure and healthy air quality, both outdoors and indoors.

“Even within the European Parliament, MEPs often struggle with a lack of awareness of rhinitis”, MEP Nessa Childers

The meeting was co-hosted by Nessa Childers (Ireland, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats), a full member of the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee (ENVI) actively contributing to the EU health policy related to allergy and asthma.

MEP Childers welcomed the launch of the Interest Group and emphasised the need to strengthen both European and national awareness promotion for improving both outdoor and indoor environments to prevent respiratory diseases, as well as to improve the quality of life of the current patients.



Mrs Nessa Childers has been committed to improve health of Europeans since elected in 2009

“Allergy is the most frequent chronic disease and health issue in Europe today”, EAACI President Nikos Papadopoulos

The President of European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI), Professor Nikos Papadopoulos, pointed out that asthma and allergic rhinitis are estimated to result in more than 100 million lost workdays and missed school days in Europe every year, and that allergic rhinitis alone costs up to 100 billion Euros per year. In addition, allergy and asthma affect individuals across the whole life cycle, impairing social life, productivity and impacting healthy aging.

Despite the heavy burden of asthma and allergy, many negative consequences could be avoided if:

- More research is financed to fill in the gaps in knowledge about allergy and asthma;
- Education and training on allergy are available both for the general population and health professionals, as well as public health programmes are strengthened;
- Specific actions are taken at the European and national levels to include allergy and asthma in all relevant EU policies.

Professor Papadopoulos welcomed the launch of the Interest Group and expressed his satisfaction with the prospective collaboration with all participating stakeholders.



According to Nikos Papadopoulos, the burden of asthma and allergy can be avoided if health is included in all EU policies



“Allergy and asthma result not only in high economic costs, but first and foremost in decreased quality of life and stigmatisation of patients”, EFA President Breda Flood

The President of the European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients’ Associations (EFA) Breda Flood provided an inspiring speech on the European patient’s perspective. She highlighted the following challenges related to asthma and allergy:

- Lack of clear understanding of allergy causes;
- Poor/incorrect diagnosis;
- Neglect and under-recognition by national healthcare authorities and the general public;
- Inequalities in the management of allergy within and among Member States in Europe;
- Lack of preventive measures.

EFA President further emphasised the need of common European actions to foster research, education and reduce inequalities, as all as

For Breda Flood, the EU needs more research, education and reduction of inequalities to abolish the stigma associated with allergy and asthma

to abolish the stigma associated with allergy and asthma. She warmly welcomed the establishment of the group that will help ensuring that the needs of people living with allergy and asthma are included into all relevant EU policies.

“Support health, not allergy”, Prof Tari Haahtela, Helsinki University

Emeritus Professor of Clinical Allergology of the Helsinki University, Tari Haahtela, presented the Finnish Allergy Programme (2008-2018). The Finnish programme is a gold example of how the right approach to tackling allergy is to actually endorse health and not allergy. It is about strengthening tolerance, adopting a new attitude to allergy and only avoid allergen if mandatory, preventing allergy attacks and exacerbations, and work towards improving air quality and encouraging smoking cessation. The idea of the programme is to support health, not allergy. But, of course, support the allergic individuals.

After six years of existence, this national programme has already started to reduce the allergy burden. Altogether, the defined and ambitious goals for the 10-year period were:

- **Prevent allergies**
Indicator: prevalence of asthma, allergic rhinitis and atopic dermatitis reduces by 20%;
- **Increase tolerance to allergens in the population**
Indicator: avoidance diets decrease by 50%;
- **Improve allergy diagnostics**
Indicator: all patients are tested in a quality certified allergy-testing centre;
- **Reduce work-related allergies**
Indicator: work related allergies decline by 50%;
- **Focus to severe allergies and reduce attacks**
Indicator: “Good allergy care” employed in the country, asthma attacks reduced by 40%;
- **Reduce costs caused by allergies**
Indicator: total costs of allergic diseases reduce by 20%.

The initiative is to be regarded as best practice for allergy prevention, management and care at Member State level and should pave the way to finish the allergy epidemic at EU level.



According to Tari Haahtela, the Finnish Allergy Programme is, among other features, a successful educational tool to inform patients and help prevent symptoms

Panel discussion – “Working together: what role can the EU play to address the allergy and asthma epidemic in Europe?”



The presentations were then followed by a panel discussion moderated by Antonella Muraro, EAACI Secretary General and President Elect for 2015-2017, and Susanna Palkonen, EFA Director.

Dr Roberto Bertollini, Chief Scientist and WHO Representative to the European Union, highlighted that allergy and asthma are cross-cutting issues that relate to several EU policy streams, such as public health, chronic diseases, chemicals, food, tobacco, environment, air quality and research. Dr Bertollini further remarked that existing EU legal frameworks that can impact on allergy and asthma (e.g. the tobacco control legislation) also need to be better monitored and implemented at national level for the benefit of allergy and asthma patients.

Dr Karim Berkouk, Deputy Head of Unit of the Directorate General for Research and Innovation at the European Commission, agreed with the previous panelist that allergy and asthma are cross-cutting issues, and therefore initiatives focusing on these diseases have many opportunities to be funded by Horizon 2020, which takes a more transversal approach than previous programmes. Dr Berkouk also noted that the European Commission has been funding research projects on allergy and asthma (e.g.: EARIP, U-BIOPRED) in the past and intends to continue in the future. He further highlighted that it is key to transfer research findings into real-life benefits for patients and expressed his satisfaction that as a result of a greater involvement of patient groups, the EU research is becoming more and more patient centric.

André Zuber, Policy Officer at the Directorate General for Environment in the European Commission, pointed out that despite the fact that healthcare is a Member States competency, the EU still has many opportunities to influence positive developments in health, through various European legislations and policy streams such as on chemicals, cosmetics, air quality, tobacco, chronic diseases, etc. He also noted that currently the EU is discussing an EU Clean Air Policy Package and is planning to set up a comprehensive EU Framework to tackle chronic diseases. It is to be hoped that both actions could help address some of the unmet needs in asthma and allergy if developed and implemented correctly.

Closure

MEPs Pietikäinen and Childers closed the meeting reiterating their support to the European Parliament Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma: the group will be of great public health value for EU citizens and instrumental for bringing allergy and asthma higher on the EU policy agenda.

Next steps

The next meeting of the Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma will take place before the summer break in the European Parliament, during the allergy season and when the EU Clean Air Policy Package will be actively debated within the EU institutions.

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The European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) is a non-profit organisation active in the field of allergic and immunologic diseases. EAACI was founded in 1956 in Florence and has become the largest medical association in Europe in the field of allergy and clinical immunology. It includes over 8,000 members from 121 countries, as well as 47 National Allergy Societies. Visit www.eaaci.org for more information.

European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA)

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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 38 national associations in 24 countries and over 400,000 patients. Visit www.efanet.org for more information.