

Policy meeting of the European Parliament Interest Group on Allergy & Asthma
“Allergy and asthma patients need clean air in Europe”
July 1st, 2015 – 17h30-19h30 – European Parliament- Room ASP 5E-2
Co-hosted by MEP Nessa Childers (S&D, Ireland) and MEP Sirpa Pietikainen (EPP, Finland)
Co-organised by EFA and EAACI

Speech by Christine Rolland- EFA President

EFA is the European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations representing 40 national organisations in 24 European countries and more than 30% of Europeans affected by asthma, allergy and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

More than 150 million EU citizens suffer from chronic allergy and the number is increasing. It is estimated that by 2025, more than 50% of all Europeans will suffer from at least one type of allergy.

The economic burden is huge (between 55 and 151 billion euro per year) and the quality of life of allergic patients is often severely impaired.

Asthma and allergy begin quite earlier in life than other chronic diseases, imposing a high lifetime burden on individuals, their carers and European healthcare systems. They are the most common chronic diseases in children and the leading cause of school absences, emergency department visits and hospitalizations. Asthma and allergic rhinitis alone are estimated to result in more than 100 million lost workdays and missed school days in Europe every year.

It has been proven that air pollution contributes to respiratory diseases and worsens respiratory allergies.

Air pollution is responsible for more than 400 000 early deaths each year in Europe. Living near polluted roads is responsible for about 15-30% of all new cases of asthma in children. Air pollution and climate change also significantly worsen allergy symptoms. Because of higher concentrations of carbon dioxide in the air, plants grow faster, produce more aggressive pollen grains. Due to climate change, the growing season of many trees and weeds starts earlier and lasts longer. Co-exposure to grass pollen and particulate matter leads to stronger allergic responses and worsens pollen allergy.

Free access to clean air is a fundamental need and right for all European citizens. We all agree on the fact that there is a lot at stake.

This is why EFA has 4 main requests:

- The EU should foster allergy and asthma research in Europe by allocating funds under Horizon 2020 and the Third Public Health Programme with the objective of helping discovering the still unknown causes of allergy, and moving towards personalised treatments.

- An EU strategy on chronic diseases with disease specific best practices that were successful in some countries and could be adopted and adjusted by others, including the Finnish Allergy Programme, should be developed to improve allergy and asthma management and enhancing patients' quality of life. During the launch event of this Interest Group last March, we were delighted to hear a representative of the European Commission mentioning that the Commissioner is developing such a framework, as a follow-up of the reflection process with Member States in 2012 and of the first-ever EU summit last year. We believe patients' involvement is crucial and we would be happy to provide our unique expertise of living with the disease.
- The EU should also prevent allergy and asthma onset and symptoms worsening through acting on the responsible health determinants, such as indoor and outdoor air quality, real-time pollen monitoring and information in Europe, chemicals' exposure, tobacco use and exposure. Taking into account the health in all policies principle, EFA is calling for stricter EU tobacco control measures, an EU strategy on indoor air quality as requested for the first time by the Seventh Environment Action Programme, better air quality in Europe and reducing exposure to chemicals in everyday life.
- In particular, when it comes to air quality, that is the topic of today's policy meeting, we are asking for significantly stricter emission reduction commitments, therefore ensuring the achievement of WHO recommended levels by 2030, legally binding emission reduction commitments for 2025 for all pollutants covered by the directive, and legally binding emission reduction commitments for methane and mercury for all three targets years (2020, 2025 and 2030).

As a conclusion, I would say: It's time for clean air, everywhere.