

## PRESS RELEASE

*Introducing the Finnish Allergy Programme 2008-2018:*

### **Adopting a new approach to allergies: stop avoiding allergens unnecessarily, and start to endorse health instead of allergy**

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**Brussels, 11 December 2012** – The prevalence of allergic diseases is growing both in Finland and in many other countries, but the strategy of allergen avoidance has not proved effective in halting this development. To reduce the burden of allergies, the Finns have implemented Finnish Allergy Programme, a unique public health programme with an educational action plan. It unites both public health care professionals and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in an effort to increase immunological tolerance and change people's attitudes to supporting health instead of medicalising common and mild allergy symptoms.

"Allergy health – living a full life with allergy – is a key concept. It can be achieved by stopping to avoid allergens unless mandatory, strengthening your tolerance by increasing your contact with the natural environment, by detecting and treating severe allergies early to prevent attacks and worsening of symptoms, and by stopping to smoke," said Professor **Tari Haahtela** of the Skin and Allergy Hospital at Helsinki University Hospital, Chairman of the Allergy Programme Secretariat. He was one of the many speakers introducing the Finnish Allergy Programme 2008-2018 during a seminar arranged by the European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA) on 8-9 November in Helsinki, Finland.

The seminar was arranged to introduce delegations from different EFA member countries to the Finnish Allergy Programme, so that they could start devising similar action plans in their own countries. The meeting was attended by delegations from Bulgaria, Tuscany region of Italy and Norway.

The goals of the Finnish Allergy Programme are to prevent allergies, increase tolerance to allergens in the population, improve allergy diagnostics, reduce work-related allergies, focus on severe allergies to reduce exacerbations and attacks, and to reduce the costs caused by allergies. Quantified goals have been defined to measure the results achieved. "The results obtained so far are encouraging. We are on the right track," Professor Haahtela commented.

"Networking is the key to successful implementation," said Professor **Erkka Valovirta**, Pediatrician and Pediatric Allergist, and Medical Advisor to Filha in the implementation of the Programme. "The Finnish Allergy Programme, which is a government-backed national health programme implemented by four Finnish NGOs — the Finnish Lung Health Association Filha, the Finnish Allergy and Asthma Federation, Pulmonary Association Heli and the Finnish Central Organisation for Skin Patients — follows in the footsteps of the Finnish Asthma Programme, carried out in 1994-2004. We collaborate with the existing nationwide network of asthma responsible general practitioners, asthma nurses, asthma pharmacists, allergy nurses at maternity and child health

clinics, allergy school nurses, and occupational nurses. There is a lack of primary care resources, but the key idea is not to increase the work load of programme participants, but to make a change in how we work,” Professor Valovirta pointed out.

The Finnish Allergy Programme focuses on educating professional health care personnel and increasing the awareness among patients and the general public. The NGOs implementing the programme are arranging allergy training events for health care professionals in central hospitals and municipal health centres around the country. Practical information materials are provided to professionals and allergy patients alike. The goal of the latter is to enable guided self-management of patients’ symptoms. In addition to these tools, internet, radio and television campaigns are used. “We have two target groups: media and the general public. We try to be creative and go where the people are – to social media, that is,” said Adjunct Professor **Kimmo Saarinen**, Head of South Karelia Allergy and Environment Institute, and Project Manager of the Finnish Allergy Programme.

“Nothing happens without funding. The Finnish Allergy Programme was made possible via two channels: governmental funding to the Finnish Lung Health Association to enable the multidisciplinary education of professional health care personnel, complemented partially by collaboration with pharmaceutical companies, and funding provided by the Finnish Slot Machine Association (RAY) to enable education and awareness-raising of the general public,” explained **Ilkka Repo**, Managing Director of the Finnish Allergy and Asthma Federation.

RAY is a public corporation that raises funds through gaming operations to promote Finnish health and welfare. “RAY has a monopoly in gambling and casino activities in Finland. It is a globally unique funding apparatus that grants EUR 300 million annually to public health projects. In 2011 RAY financed the work of non-profit organisations with EUR 138 million,” said Professor **Erkki Vartiainen**, Assistant Director General of the National Institute for Health and Welfare. “Finland is a consensus society, so we have to get all key players on board to achieve changes,” he added.

“The involvement of pharmacies is important for a public health programme. Pharmacies have frequent and low-threshold contacts with the patients. Their highly qualified staff can counsel the customers and detect those who are clearly in need of more intensive therapy,” said **Johanna Salimäki**, Pharmaceutical Leader (deputy) of the Association of Finnish Pharmacies.

Another important key player group are nurses. There is a public health nurse network in maternity clinics and schools, and nurses play a crucial role in spreading the main messages of the Finnish Allergy Programme.

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The **European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients’ Associations (EFA)** is a non-profit network of allergy, asthma and 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. [www.efanet.org](http://www.efanet.org)