

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT INTEREST GROUP ON ALLERGY AND ASTHMA

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**Asthma and allergy patients  
need clean air in Europe!**



## EVENT 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)

**1<sup>st</sup> of July, 2015**

## Allergy and asthma patients need clean air in Europe

Air pollution causes more than 400,000 premature deaths in Europe and between €300 and €900 billion in health-related damages every year. Latest research has confirmed that living near polluted roads is responsible for 15-30% of all new asthma cases in children and COPD for people aged 65 or more. Studies show that air pollution and climate change also significantly worsen allergy symptoms.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, the European Parliament Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma met to discuss how air quality affects EU citizens' health and how allergy and asthma – which are among the top chronic diseases in Europe – are influenced and exacerbated by poor air quality.

The event was co-hosted by MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen (Finland, European People's Party – EPP), Chair of the Interest Group, and MEP Nessa Childers (Ireland, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats – S&D), and was organised by the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) and the European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA), that are jointly running the Secretariat.

Approximately fifty participants participated in the event, including four Members of the European Parliament/assistants, representatives of the European Commission, World Health Organisation (WHO), academia, industry and patients.

## The European Parliament Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma

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 half of the European population will suffer from allergy.

To raise awareness of allergy and asthma as highly prevalent chronic diseases, as well as to foster European research on allergy, share best practices and promote allergy and asthma health in all policies, passionate Members of the European Parliament launched in early 2015 an Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma.

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. It serves as a forum to share expertise and align interests engaging with relevant EU policy-makers and stakeholders on allergy and asthma health.

## “Clean air is of supreme importance to our health”, MEP Nessa Childers



The meeting was opened by Nessa Childers (Ireland, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats), a Member of the European Parliament sitting in the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI).

The event was marked by a heat-wave coupled with an air pollution peak right at the door of the European Parliament. According to Ms Childers, the meeting took place in a decisive moment for discussions on air quality in Europe, as on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, ENVI will vote on the National Emission Ceilings (NEC) Directive, a crucial piece of legislation regulating pollutant emissions.

*Ms Nessa Childers has been committed to improve health of Europeans since her election in 2009.*

## “If we get rid of particulate matter in Europe, gases are next on the line. They are making us allergic too”, Jeroen Buters – EAACI

According to Professor Jeroen Buters, Deputy-Director of the Centre for Allergy and Environment of the Technical University of Munich, “in the nineties it was thought that the ceiling for allergy levels was reached, but recent numbers show there is no stopping. It is pollution and lifestyle that are making us allergic”. It is clear that EU air pollution standards are far less strict than the ones proposed by the World Health Organisation. Professor Buters insisted that “in Europe we are doing well about Particulate Matter (PM) 10, but that does not mean we are doing good enough!”. For him, the EU can do more: “the EU should monitor the smaller particles in the air, especially PM 2.5, and Nitric Oxide, which are the most dangerous for human health”. In his views, the easiest way to quickly limit air pollution is to change fuels from the heavy pollutants to cleaner ones. He also highlighted that pollen should be included in air quality monitoring.



*Jeroen Buters is the Chair of the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) Group on Aerobiology and Pollution Allergy.*

## “Our target is to reduce emissions, with a view to decrease premature death and health impact by more than 52%”, Thomas Verheye – European Commission

“It is not a secret that there are serious air quality problems in Europe with severe health consequences”, recognised Thomas Verheye, Head of the Air Quality Unit at the European Commission Directorate-General for Environment (DG ENV). But even if European air quality standards are obsolete and not in line with WHO air quality guidelines, the 2013 Commission’s proposal for a reviewed National Emission Ceilings Directive was not extremely ambitious as “it was not a good idea to bring very strict new legislation to the table, when 17 Member States are facing problems in Courts because of air pollution”, said Mr Verheye.

During this presentation, Mr Verheye expressed his concerns on the latest Council discussion on the NEC that suggested a revision of the pollutant levels to 2030 that would be even less ambitious than the text proposed by the Commission. “A strong voice from the health community can help overcome resistance to taking further cost-effective actions”, concluded the European Commission representative, with the objective of reaching air pollution levels in line with WHO guidelines by 2030.



*For Mr Verheye, the benefit of reducing pollutant emissions is obvious, we need solid policy for 2030.*

## “Climate Change is a medical emergency”, Anne Stauffer – HEAL

Health effects provoked by climate change are already felt today in Europe. According to Anne Stauffer, Deputy-Director of the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), “climate change plus air pollution is a dangerous mix for our health: there are increasingly new patterns in the allergy season, and air pollution can modify the allergic potential of plants”. It is estimated that over 260,000 premature deaths would still occur in 2030 even after implementation of the NEC Commission’s proposal. Compared to 2005, the harmful effects on health in 2030 will be reduced only by 52% and not eliminated. Ms Stauffer underlined that a recent European Parliament’s study demonstrated that, taking into account the synergies with the EU climate and energy package, more ambition is possible and can be achieved at the same or lower cost. “2025 reductions should be binding for all pollutants while ammonia, methane and mercury



*For Ms Stauffer, we should also be looking into agricultural emissions as each sector needs to take their fair share to get cleaner air.*

should also be addressed. 2030 is a long timeframe and we want a clear commitment to tackle air pollution”, she concluded.

### “Support health, not allergy”, MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen

The perspective of the European Parliament on the revision of the NEC Directive was presented by MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen, substitute member in the leading EP ENVI Committee. Ms Pietikäinen said that part of the European Parliament is not satisfied with the low ambition for 2030 limits coming from the Council discussions, and “if we do not link health costs and air quality and communicate this to the politicians, we are going to lose the battle”. Ms Pietikäinen referred to pollutants coming from the agricultural sector and proposed to look at the idea of a circular economy, “there are agricultural residues that farmers could actually use and sell, and that would result in better air and water quality,” she noted. Although some political parties are not in favour of regulating ammonia and methane, other mechanisms, like control of emissions from non-road mobile machinery, could be activated to reduce air pollution, suggested Ms Pietikäinen.



*According to Sirpa Pietikäinen, it is a political requirement for Europe to have an ambitious air quality policy with revised limits for pollutants.*

### Roundtable discussion – “Health in all policies: air quality, allergy and asthma health”



*From left to right, EAACI President Antonella Muraro, EFA President Christine Rolland, WHO Representative Renata Gilli, EFA Board Member Dan Murphy and EESC Representative Ingrid Kössler.*

During the debate, representatives from patients' organisations, healthcare professionals and EU and international bodies discussed what the European Union could do to improve the air quality we breathe and the health and quality of life of Europeans.

## Less pollution and more research to cure allergy and asthma

The reality is that inaction today will cost the European Union more in the future. The severity of the clinical manifestations of allergy in young children is increasing and according to Professor Antonella Muraro, EAACI's President, "air pollutants can influence these clinical manifestations: breathing dirty air at schools can provoke severe allergic manifestation in children and the next generation. With Europe at the forefront of the healthy living concept, we have an ethical responsibility to move forward".

With an estimation that by 2025 more than 50% of Europeans will suffer from at least one type of allergy, "the EU should prevent asthma and allergy trends and symptoms getting worse through responsible actions to tackle health determinants, such as reducing indoor and outdoor pollution, ensuring real-time pollen monitoring and information in Europe, limiting chemicals exposure and tobacco use and exposure", said Christine Rolland, President of the European Federation of Allergies and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations. Air pollution, both indoor and outdoor, affects 100% of the European population and is responsible for a wide range of health effects. However, people living with asthma, allergy and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are more vulnerable than others to all kinds of pollutants and find themselves at an increased risk of experiencing harmful effects from exposure to air pollution.

For people with asthma, allergy and COPD, the health effects due to air pollution can be devastating and can lead to a significantly reduction of their quality of life. Air pollution is one major factor that triggers asthma attacks and "we could be part of a generation that could cure people with asthma", said Dan Murphy, Managing Director of External Affairs at Asthma UK and EFA Board Member. Although 10% of Europeans have asthma, only 0.5% of the EU research budget goes to asthma and COPD. "There is a need for greater research and we need more money invested into the impact of pollution levels, which will affect future generations", Mr Murphy added.

## Air pollution reduction needs more commitment than investment

Ms Renata Gili from the World Health Organisation (WHO) representation to the European Union read a statement from the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health underlining that 90% of Europeans living in cities are exposed to harmful levels of air pollution. Air pollution is the leading cause of death from environmental related matters worldwide and represents a serious economic burden for Europe. More needs to be done to tackle outdoor and indoor air pollution. WHO is reviewing the air quality guidelines to ensure an even higher protection of people's health.

Ingrid Kössler from the European Economic Social Committee (EESC) recognised being frightened by the forecast of the increasing numbers of allergy and asthma. For her the

choice was simple, “if investment in air quality would be a business proposal nobody would hesitate investing on clean air”.

## Closure

The European Parliament ENVI Committee has the opportunity to propose stricter emission levels that would help the European Union reach air quality levels in accordance to WHO guidelines in the medium term. All panelists stressed the necessity to improve air quality in Europe for the health benefit of all its citizens, and it was suggested that the EU should become an example worldwide and set ambitious air quality standards to prevent harm to Europeans’ health.

## Next steps

MEPs Pietikäinen and Childers closed the meeting pleased to see by the higher interest the European Parliament Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma is receiving and keen on proposing new issues for discussion: the group will serve as a platform to bring allergy and asthma higher on the EU policy agenda.

The next meeting of the Interest Group on Allergy and Asthma will take place after the summer break in the European Parliament.

## Contacts

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*The European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) is the largest medical association in the field of allergy and clinical immunology, uniting more than 9,000 academicians, research investigators and clinicians from 121 different countries. Visit [www.eaaci.org](http://www.eaaci.org) for more information.*

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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 40 national associations in 24 countries and over 400,000 patients. Visit [www.efanet.org](http://www.efanet.org) for more information.*