



Raising the standards of care for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in Europe - Event Report

Hosted by:

MEP Romana Jerković (S&D, Croatia)
MEP András Kulja (EPP, Hungary)
MEP Tilly Metz (Greens/Luxembourg)

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Raising the standards of care for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in Europe

On the 5th of February, EFA held the event on “**Raising the standards of care for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in Europe**” at the European Parliament. The event aimed to bring MEPs together to discuss the burden of COPD, exposing the existing gaps in prevention and care, and to discuss bringing of COPD as a top priority for European health. Speakers outlined key steps the EU must take to turn the tide on this disease, to end the neglect of COPD and drive real change for COPD patients.

The event was co-hosted by Vice-Chairs of the Parliamentary Committee on Public Health (EP SANT) MEP Romana Jerkovic (S&D / Croatia) and MEP Tilly Metz (Greens / Luxembourg), as well as by Vice-Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Environment, Climate and Food Safety (EP ENVI) MEP Andras Kulja (EPP / Hungary). All three MEPs are committed to improve lung health and are members of the MEP Lung Health Group.

The event was hybrid, with around 65 participants joining in-person and over 20 people joining online. The event was moderated by EU health reporter Ms Sarah-Taïssir Bencharif.



Context

On World COPD Day 2024, EFA published the report “Raising the standards of care for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in Europe”, which revealed that no significant progress has been made to improve COPD prevention and management compared to EFA’s prior COPD report in 2013. Despite being one of the biggest public health challenges today, COPD remains unrecognized by the public and by policymakers. Despite COPD being a disease that steals the breath of 36 million Europeans and accounts for 6% of total healthcare spending in the European Union, it still falls off the decision-makers’ radar. It is urgent for COPD to be recognized as the public health problem it represents in Europe and position it at the forefront of policymakers’ agendas.



Introduction

“We need to break the cycle of neglect for COPD”

In her opening remarks, EFA President **Marcia Podestà** shed light on the hidden crisis of COPD, a disease still overlooked. It affects 36 million patients in Europe and can no longer be ignored. She pointed to EFA’s latest report, which reveals a decade of inaction putting the healthcare sustainability at risk.

Marcia laid out four key action points from the EFA community, demanding bold and immediate change. Top of the list: improving early COPD detection and diagnosis. Equipping doctors with the right tools and implementing lung health checks in primary healthcare are key to catching the disease sooner.



Marcia Podestà

The misconception that COPD is only a result of tobacco must be replaced, as Marcia pointed to the impacts of air pollution and climate change on respiratory health. The last priority includes prioritising funding and research for lung health. We encourage the EU to enable high end pharmaceutical and COPD management research with patients always at the centre.

Marcia made a final call to act now to advance on lung health in Europe in collaboration with patient organizations, setting the stage for an engaging and inspiring discussion on lung health.



Spirometry for lung testing in Europe should be as easy and widespread as blood testing. We always wonder, why is it not?

**Marcia Podestà,
EFA President**

The second priority is ensuring equitable access to COPD care across Europe. We call for the COPD standards of care to be translated into national and European lung health plans, ensuring that COPD is fully addressed. Third on the list is tackling the respiratory disease stigma.



Europe is now at a critical juncture for healthcare, with increasing needs and an ageing population. Investing in COPD prevention today, is the wise thing to do for better lung health tomorrow.

**Marcia Podestà,
EFA President**

“COPD patients cannot afford another decade of inaction”

Opening her remarks with impact, **MEP Romana Jerković** set the tone with a strong call for policy action on lung health, highlighting the urgent need to address the current neglect and inaction around COPD. Healthcare systems as they stand today are not fully addressing the challenge of COPD, as the disease extends beyond individual patient care.

With the successful implementation of the first early lung cancer screening program in the EU by Croatia, MEP Jerković showed that progress in lung health is achievable, and best practices should be promoted and disseminated across Member States.

Early detection should be one of the main pillars in lung health policies. It is vital in slowing the disease progression and reducing morbidities. Anchoring early detection and COPD care into primary care is necessary – it is as simple as integrating lung health checks into routine check-ups. She therefore stated to support EU research on the cost-effectiveness of early detection and treatment.



MEP Romana Jerković, S&D, Croatia. Vice-Chair, EP SANT Committee



For diseases like COPD, detection is just the start of the patient journey. It is our duty, as MEPs to support patients with policies that allow them to have their best life possible.

MEP Romana Jerković

While there is no cure for COPD, the disease can often be prevented—and tobacco isn’t the only culprit. The MEP called for greater investments in policies to address air pollution and climate change, aiming to boost prevention and avoid further harm to people already diagnosed with COPD. The MEP acknowledged that much work remains to be done, but ended her speech with motivating and promising words, calling for an end to the decade of inaction and urging decisive action on lung health, with patients at the heart of it all.



The S&D group will continue to place patients, and the patients’ organisations representing them, at the forefront of its policies. Let’s Keep Breathing, together!

MEP Romana Jerković

“Lung health deserves to be addressed more effectively at the EU level”

The opening session concluded with a video message from **MEP Tilly Metz** of the Greens group, calling for lung health action and policies to benefit all. She echoed that as there is no quick fix for COPD – we must take continuous action on various aspects and levels because COPD can be prevented. Smoking, being the leading cause of COPD, should be restricted through advanced EU policies that go beyond taxation measures, combined with investment in easy to access smoking cessation programs. However, we should also address other risk factors like air pollution.

As MEP, Tilly Metz outlined the three key actions on which the EU should focus. First, the EU should collect robust data on COPD, which supports her second priority: best practices in primary care should be identified and effectively implemented nationally. Lastly, the EU should encourage learning through the establishment of centres of excellence and digital health initiatives for COPD management. MEP Tilly Metz concluded her video message by urging that lung health be prioritised alongside other key EU health priorities.



MEP Tilly Metz, Greens, Luxembourg. Vice-Chair of EP SANT Committee



The air we breathe also plays a role, as exposure to air pollution significantly contributes to COPD. Together, we can build a fairer and healthier Europe, with respiratory patients on board.

MEP Tilly Metz



Roundtable: Breaking the cycle of neglect for COPD care and prevention across Europe

The inspiring opening remarks on advancing lung health policies and research at the EU level, with a focus on patients and patient groups, set the stage for a productive roundtable discussion.

The roundtable was composed of **MEP András Kulja**, also a physician, **Paula Duarte**, Vice-President of RESPIRA, the Portuguese COPD patients association, and **Svetlana Atanasova** of Eurocarers, advocate of informal carers of COPD patients.

Early diagnosis – key to improving COPD patients' quality of life

Early detection and diagnosis can halt COPD disease progression and comorbidities, improving patients' quality of life. When asked how specific EU policies and initiatives can enhance early COPD detection, **MEP András Kulja** emphasised the complexity of the topic and the potential for progress supported by the newly established European Parliamentary Committee for Health (EP SANT).

MEP Kulja explained the three pillars he considers crucial for early detection. Education was the first pillar to increase the health literacy on COPD, to especially enable primary care doctors to recognise COPD earlier. Then, COPD screening systems should be included in healthcare. Finally, structured access and use of health data. The EU Health Data Space for instance will have the potential to better detect COPD on a European level and identify vulnerable populations and patterns related to the disease.



MEP András Kulja, EPP, Hungary. Vice-Chair, EP ENVI Committee

Unknown COPD – how to increase awareness

Although COPD is highly prevalent in Europe, many have never heard of the disease before. **Paula Duarte** highlighted a striking fact: in 2022, 70% of Portuguese people were unaware of what COPD is. To increase awareness, Paula called for stronger education among medical students and healthcare professionals at all levels, from primary care doctors to hospital staff and pharmacists. She stressed that lung health needs a broader, life-cycle approach, where health education should start in primary schools and be featured in classic as well as new media platforms to help prevent COPD from developing later in life.



COPD, a disease that goes beyond the patient

Like many chronic diseases, COPD does not only affect the individual but also their family and friends, who provide daily informal care. **Svetlana Atanasova** highlighted the significant burden carried by informal caregivers in the EU, with their contribution valued at up to 320-368 billion EUR annually. However, their role in sustaining healthcare systems continue to go unrecognized. To support informal carers and raise awareness, Svetlana outlined some key action points to be taken at EU level. Informal carers should receive financial aid and flexibilities regarding their employment, to support them in the care they provide to COPD patients on a daily basis. Many people become informal caregivers overnight, without any training or prior experience. Supporting them with targeted education and fully integrating them into healthcare systems and primary care as key providers are therefore crucial steps to improving the quality of the care they supply. Finally, Svetlana highlighted how digital solutions and assisting technologies might support informal caregivers in performing their tasks.



Svetlana Atanasova



The EU must ensure that the invaluable role of informal carers is reflected in all relevant policies.

**Svetlana Atanasova,
Project Manager, Eurocarers**

COPD patient priorities for the future

EFA's report "Raising the standards of care for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in Europe" highlighted not only areas of great progress, such as treatment reimbursement, but also areas that still need improvement. When **Paula Duarte** was asked about her and her organisation's priorities for the next decade, she stressed the importance of prevention. In Portugal, 800 000 people live with COPD, even though it is a preventable disease.



We must especially advance in prevention so that in the next 20-30 years, we can say that COPD is no longer a pandemic as it is now.

**Paula Duarte, Vice-President,
RESPIRA**



Paula Duarte

Paula advocated for an integrated national COPD program to be implemented, with a focus on prevention and education to improve prevention and disease management. Regional differences should be considered in such plans to ensure all patients receive appropriate care. National vaccination plans should be redefined to make sure COPD patients are better protected from viruses such as Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and influenza, as COPD exacerbations can worsen the outcomes of these infections. Finally, Paula emphasized the need for a national COPD registry as well as a homogeneous primary care network with integrated COPD screenings and precision care, which can benefit both early COPD detection as well as health equity for patients accessing care across countries.



José Albino

José Albino, President of Associação RESPIRA, explained how his organisation is working to build a strong network for primary prevention by visiting schools to educate children about smoking and COPD prevention. José called for official recognition of their work in public health education, and urged national governments and the EU to better support patient organizations. This way, respiratory patient organisations like RESPIRA can continue striving for a smoke-free future.



We'd like the new generation to be smoke-free. As patients, we want to talk to young people before they start smoking to change their behaviour.

José Albino, President, RESPIRA

The digital health era – what is in it for COPD?

Health policy has focused heavily on enabling digital health solutions, and tailoring them for COPD is a key recommendation from the EFA community. **MEP András Kulja** emphasized that the biggest challenge is creating digital solutions that meet the needs, as “there’s no single solution for everyone”. For MEP Kulja, digital solutions can help provide understandable and correct information and educate the public – essential in an era increasingly challenged by misinformation. They can also support in counterbalancing the health workforce shortages seen across Europe, reducing the administrative burden on European doctors. MEP Kulja gives the striking example of Hungary, where a shortage of approximately 1,000 general practitioners is putting immense strain on the healthcare system, leading to devastating consequences for patients. There is also a need for digital tools which identify and reach the most vulnerable groups of the population including COPD patients, for instance those living in rural areas. This can ensure that education and support reaches those often overlooked by policies today.



In Hungary, 1.5 out of 10 million people do not have proper access to primary care due to workforce shortages.

MEP András Kulja

COPD in the European Commission’s workplan

To wrap up the roundtable discussion, **Marianne Takki**, Acting Head of Unit Disease Prevention and Health Promotion from DG SANTE, acknowledged COPD as a major public health challenge, stressing the need to prevent and halt the progression of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like COPD.

Prevention is a major focus point for the European Commission – the institution actively supports Member States and stakeholders in disease prevention through the Healthier together – EU non-communicable diseases initiative. Under this initiative, several Joint Actions have been launched to address NCDs, such as PreventNCD and JARED, the latter focusing specifically on respiratory diseases and kicking off just last week. Over the next three years, JARED will focus specifically on vulnerable groups, supporting the Member States in capacity building and improving lung health literacy. As stated by Marianne, the Commission will also continue to support effective tobacco control policies and legislation; a new Joint Action will support Member States in implementing the Council recommendation on smoke-free environments. Marianne hopes that through these actions, the Commission can effectively support Member States and stakeholders in advancing on NCDs and lung health.



The new Commission will absolutely step up the work on preventive health, ensuring a comprehensive approach to health promotion and disease prevention.

**Marianne Takki,
Acting Head of Unit, DG SANTE**

Q&A Session

Jean Paul Vasseur and **Liliya Gentet** from Fédération Française des Associations et Amicales de malades, Insuffisants ou handicapés Respiratoires FFAAIR kicked off the Q&A session with two key requests in order to tackle COPD: make prescription of physical activity available and increase the prices of tobacco products across Europe.

Both **Paula Duarte** and **MEP Andràs Kulja** underlined the difficulty to address smoking and tobacco product prices, as it is linked with many other powerful financial interests. However, MEP Kulja stressed the clear link between tobacco use and lung diseases like COPD and lung cancer. The EU must therefore continue the efforts to reduce smoking rates across Europe, further emphasizing the importance of educating the next generation.



Jean Paul Vasseur and Liliya Gentet

Frank Willersinn from Alpha1 Europe, a COPD patient himself, shared the daily struggles and fears of living with the disease—constantly facing new challenges, advancements, and the need to adapt. He stressed the importance of educating not just caregivers and general practitioners but also COPD patients themselves. Awareness of all aspects of the disease, including palliative care, is crucial in helping patients understand, accept, and navigate their condition more effectively.



Frank Willersinn



We didn't learn yet about palliative medicine and end-of-life care. Millions of COPD patients will go there in the coming years. A lot of them now are afraid to suffocate.

Frank Willersinn,
President of [Alpha1 Europe](#)

Next was a clear question to MEP Kulja coming from Health and Environment Alliance [HEAL](#)'s **Sophie Perroud** – with air pollution being a major risk factor for COPD, can the MEP be trusted to ensure that the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will stop subsidizing air pollution at EU level and instead prioritizes investments in prevention?

MEP András Kulja agreed that we must keep our air clean. However, the issue of air pollution is complex, given that many industries and stakeholders are involved. He stressed the need for a balanced and sustainable transition to a greener Europe, warning that rushing drastic changes within two years could do more harm than good—burdening citizens with high costs and eroding public trust in the process. Instead, he advocated for deliberate, digestible and thought-through steps alongside public education to achieve lasting, sustainable change. Despite these challenges, MEP Kulja reaffirmed his strong commitment to steering Europe toward a greener, healthier, and more sustainable future.



Youngsters must be educated on how harmful and addictive these tobacco products are. Our lungs are for breathing clean air, not any other damaging substances.

MEP András Kulja



Closing remarks

The roundtable discussion and Q&A session offered a deeper understanding of COPD as a disease that impacts both patients, caregivers and beyond. The diverse participants and audience managed to capture the different aspects to COPD, often hidden behind untold stories from those directly affected.

The panel has highlighted the key priorities for improving lung health. There is a clear need for prevention through reducing smoking and air pollution as well as for earlier diagnoses and more standardised long-term care, including for national and European lung health plans to address these issues.

These fall in line with the recommendations and areas of priorities of the participating MEPs and the European Commission. While MEP Romana Jerković called for the implementation of early detection programs, MEP Tilly Metz highlighted the EU's potential to lead in advancing care through robust data collection and research. MEP Andràs Kulja stressed the importance of education on lung health and integration of COPD care into the healthcare systems. Marianne Takki from DG Sante emphasized the need to invest in prevention, especially for preventable diseases like COPD. These insights underscore the critical actions needed to enhance lung health outcomes across Europe.

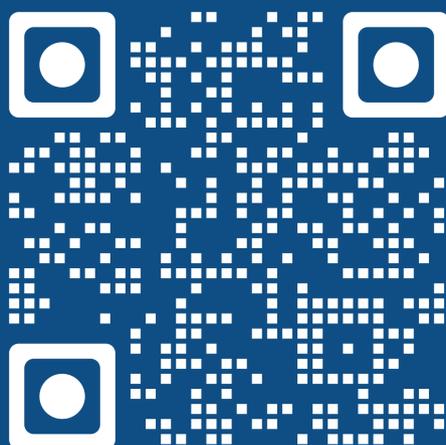
Thank you!

EFA would like to thank the MEP co-hosts and their offices for making this event possible and providing for an insightful and empowering debate on lung health: MEP Romana Jerkovic, MEP Tilly Metz and MEP Andràs Kulja. We would also like to thank Marcia Podestà from Food Allergy Italy, and the roundtable speakers Paula Duarte of RESPIRA Portugal and Svetlana Atanasova of Eurocarers for their enlightening and powerful contributions to the engaging discussion of the event as well as moderator Ms Sarah-Taïssir Bencharif. A big thank you to José Albino from RESPIRA Portugal, Jean Paul Vasseur and Liliya Gentet from Fédération Française des Associations et Amicales de malades FFAAIR from France, Frank Willersinn from Alpha1 Europe, Sophie Perroud from the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) and Pascal Garel from the European Hospital and Healthcare Federation (HOPE) for their enriching and thought-provoking questions. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the in-person as well as the online participants – your presence brought energy and impact to this event. A special thanks to EFA members and European Lung Health Group members who were able to attend in-person from Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and the United Kingdom.





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