

Asthma Care in the EU— Time for Change

European Parliament, Brussels, 24th January 2006

The incidence of asthma and other respiratory diseases has reached a critical level: asthma cases worldwide are thought to have doubled in the past ten years. This fact is all the more alarming given its severe impact on public health and society at large. The EU is not exempt from this trend. While the prevalence of chronic asthma has sharply increased across Europe, asthma treatment—both for children and adults—remains nationally fragmented, with worrying differences between countries.

The time to act is now: On 24 January 2006, Liz Lynne MEP—together with the International Primary Care Respiratory Group (IPCRG)—hosted a policy roundtable in the European Parliament in Brussels to assess the main deficiencies in current asthma treatment across Europe, as well as to discuss EU policy options to ensure adequate doctor and patient information, empowering them to make an informed choice.

Under the active participation of high-profile representatives of all parties concerned (policymakers —European Parliament and Commission—, patients, healthcare professionals and academia), a highly constructive debate took place which resulted in a number of recommendations.

Assessment of current practices in asthma treatment across Europe reveals flaws:

- Although the scientific knowledge about asthma and its optimal treatment has increased tremendously during the last twenty years, this knowledge has not been adequately reflected in the day-to-day actions of those seeing patients. This is particularly the case in community settings.
- Asthma is not seen as a systemic disease beyond the lungs. As a result, patients are inadequately diagnosed—possible allergies, such as allergic rhinitis, are not taken into account. Also, rather than considering alternative “controller” medications, the doses of inhaled steroids prescribed to the patient are simply increased. This can be linked to increase the risk of side-effects, particularly in children.
- Worse, especially in paediatric asthma, there has been a noticeable increase in the use of ‘off-label’ medicines, i.e. the prescription of medicine in a different dose, or for a different medical indication than it is licensed for.
- Furthermore, not even the multiple guidelines on asthma treatment offer adequate support and guidance for patients and healthcare professionals. Patients feel inadequately informed about the existence of innovative treatment options and are concerned about the lack of investment in research in this area.



How can the European Union contribute to the solution of this EU-wide problem of inadequate asthma care?

Although 'treatment' per se is not an EU competence, there are various EU programmes and initiatives which could help disseminate best practice, and could serve as key instruments to ensure optimal asthma management and control:

7th Research Framework Programme (FP7)

The European Commission adopted a proposal for a new EU Programme for Research in April 2005. Health is one of the programme's nine priority areas. In contrast to other diseases, such as HIV, cardiovascular diseases, cancer or diabetes, asthma is not mentioned specifically.

Since asthma is the most frequent childhood disease in Europe, most participants agreed that asthma should be made a priority in the 7th Research Framework Programme.

Pharmaceutical Forum

The European Commission has established a new Pharmaceutical Forum made up of delegates from Member States, industry, and healthcare groups. The conclusions of the Forum are designed to be debated in Council, the European Parliament and other appropriate fora.

Participants strongly believed that asthma should be used as a case study in the Forum's discussions on 'information to patients' and 'relative effectiveness of drugs'.

Public Health

The safety of asthma patients throughout Europe is key. Therefore, participants widely agreed that asthma should receive adequate consideration in EU Public Health Programmes, in order to encourage best practices regarding the information and treatment of patients in the EU.

EU funding for paediatric medicines

In the framework of the upcoming paediatrics regulation, special funding for paediatric medicines is envisaged.

Participants pointed out that it was vital for children's asthma medication to receive priority in these funding programmes, given that asthma is the most common chronic disease among children.

European Commission Internet portals

The European Commission has an internet portal on Public Health which serves as an access point for all health-related information.

It was suggested that asthma should be included prominently on this internet site.

Wider platform on asthma needed

Finally, there was widespread agreement that asthma should be discussed with a broad audience, involving key policymakers, as well as professional and patient organisations in the field. Such a platform would serve to define priorities on asthma as regards patient information, management and medication for the next five years. Furthermore, a document should be compiled which illustrates key facts on asthma for EU policymakers and the public at large.

