

IMPROVING SEVERE ASTHMA OUTCOMES IN EUROPE

CALLS TO ACTION FOR EUROPEAN POLICYMAKERS

Asthma currently affects over 330 million people around the world.¹ While severe asthma makes up only between five to ten percent of all asthma diagnoses, it accounts for over 50 percent of the overall cost of asthma globally.² In addition to having a significant impact of health system financing and resource allocation, severe asthma also places a heavy burden on patients and their families as it has a debilitating impact on both physical and mental health as well as emotional, social, and economic wellbeing. Additionally, as a complex condition associated with multimorbidity, severe asthma places serious and long-term limitations on daily functioning and quality of life. In the worst cases, severe asthma can also lead to death, despite the existence of a breadth of treatment and management strategies.

In considering the far-reaching impacts of severe asthma on both health systems and patients, the condition remains critically underprioritised in relation to other disease areas such as cancer and neurodegenerative disorders as well as mental health.

While competition for attention among disease areas is wholly undesirable, it is a reality that directly affects resource allocation in health systems and patients and, thereby, health outcomes.

The lack of attention given to severe asthma can be linked to the inadequate levels of access to care, less than favourable health outcomes, and long-term knock-on effects on both health systems and labour markets seen around the world.

Poorly implemented or even the complete lack of guidelines and protocols for the diagnosis and management of severe asthma have given rise to inefficient care pathways that leave patients with inadequate care and put additional pressure on already struggling health systems.

Moreover, the sensitivity of severe asthma outcomes to environmental and socioeconomic factors strongly indicates that the effective treatment, management, and prevention of severe asthma demands a holistic approach.

1 Enliari O, Sinha S. The Global Impact of Asthma in Adult Populations. *Ann Glob Health*. 2019;Jan 22:85(1):2.
2 Al Efraji K, Fitz Gerald JM. Current and emerging treatments for severe asthma. *J Thorac Dis*. 2015;7(11):E522-E525

A greater focus on severe asthma as well as the many factors that support both prevention and improved management of the condition would serve to break the cycle of insufficient attention, awareness, and, most importantly, action – a cycle which leads to poor individual health outcomes. It would also support improved health system sustainability and efficiency as well as economic productivity.

Crucially, none of the challenges presented by severe asthma are insurmountable. Numerous best practices, effective treatments, and robust management strategies can be found throughout many health systems around the world. However, successfully addressing severe asthma requires concerted and collaborative action and commitment from a wide range of stakeholders and organisations, as no one stakeholder group or organisation can alone engage in or realise the comprehensive change needed to effectively take on the many diverse and complex aspects of the severe asthma burden. Concretely, policymakers at all levels of government must join together with medical experts, the health workforce, industry, and patients to realise, adapt, and implement better approaches to severe asthma and respiratory health at large. A future without a critical burden of severe asthma exists – but it is up to us to act on it!

Importantly, the first steps in this direction have recently been taken.

On September 20, 2023, a diverse group of stakeholders met in Brussels, Belgium, to discuss the various and serious gaps in severe asthma care identified by the recently published Severe Asthma Index. On the basis of the discussion, the expert stakeholders also jointly identified a series of actions that stakeholders can undertake to optimise health systems' approaches to severe asthma and, most importantly, improve outcomes for individual patients and the severe asthma patient community at large, with a particular focus on addressing severe asthma within Europe and the European Union:

1. Placing asthma at the forefront of national and regional chronic disease action

Policymakers in coordination with patient organisations and health professionals should clearly and consistently communicate the disproportionate and widespread impact of asthma and severe asthma on health systems and patients, with the aim of making improved asthma care a focal point of both national and regional, e.g., EU-level, efforts to combat non-communicable diseases.

2. Mobilising policymakers to encourage coordinated policy responses on asthma and severe asthma, highlighting a “health in all policies” approach

Policymakers on the national and regional levels should undertake efforts to harmonise approaches to asthma care, with a particular focus on the identification, transfer, and efficient adaptation of best practices between European countries. Coordination between and across policy environments should highlight the need for holistic approaches to asthma care, such as the “health in all policies” approach. Moreover, on an EU level, efforts to drive policy harmonisation may also provide an opening to establish greater EU competencies over the health domain, especially as it pertains to prevention and early detection of non-communicable diseases.

3. Supporting better production, collection, use, and analysis of standardised public health and clinical data related to asthma and severe asthma

Countries should incentivise and ultimately mandate improved production, recording, and utilisation of asthma- and severe asthma-specific data following a set of common standards. Severe asthma is currently significantly underreported in clinical settings due in large part to inconsistent coding practices, leading to an increased probability of patients receiving inadequate care and suboptimal allocation of health system resources. Moreover, the current dearth of severe asthma data and barriers to accessing the few datasets that do exist render it extremely difficult to develop a comprehensive and consistent understanding of the full impact of severe asthma.

4. Prioritising and incentivising activities and innovation within asthma and severe asthma care through research programmes

Policymakers should move to incentivise cutting-edge research and development activities in asthma and severe asthma care by designing more funding calls related to chronic respiratory disease management and treatment under, for example, the EU4Health and Horizon Europe research and innovation programmes.

5. Championing legislation to address asthma risk factors such as socioeconomic inequalities and environmental exposure and climate change

As a complex, multifaceted disease, severe asthma must be addressed comprehensively. While policies specifically targeting healthcare services and access to care are critical, there is also a need for policies that effectively address environmental and socioeconomic factors, which have a direct impact on health outcomes among severe asthma patients. Policymakers should work in concert with key stakeholders representing all policy domains to ensure robust policy outputs aimed at addressing the burden of severe asthma.

6. Ensuring national action plans and non-communicable disease strategies reflect the latest best practices in asthma care

Country-level stakeholders should both scan for and identify best practices in asthma care and adapt their learnings to their national context by harnessing local knowledge and experience. Relevant policymakers should make it a priority to ensure that these learnings are reflected in national NCD strategies, and that NCD strategies are consistently updated to keep pace with the latest developments in asthma care.

7. Developing comprehensive national asthma programmes founded on evidence-based approaches that emphasise prevention and early detection and include measures for adapting best practices to national and local characteristics

Given the extensive impact of asthma and severe asthma, national policymakers should prioritise the development of fit-for-purpose national asthma programmes that respond directly to the unique challenges and characteristics of their own health systems and disease burdens. These programmes should take a long-term approach and build on a strong vision and tangible goals for improving asthma and severe asthma outcomes. In addition to activities aimed at reforming and improving health system processes and access to care, programmes should provide support for awareness campaigns, boosting patient empowerment, and providing training and upskilling for healthcare professionals.

8. Allocating public funding to asthma-specific research to support more nuanced and localised understanding of the burden and impact of asthma and severe asthma

To support the development of national strategies and asthma programmes, national policymakers should provide financial and logistical support for country-level asthma research. Research activities should aim to produce a solid evidence base that will offer a nuanced understanding of each country's needs, challenges, and opportunities regarding asthma care. Support for research activities should be granted over the long term to enable longitudinal studies so that national trends and progress can be accurately tracked.

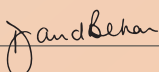
9. Utilising regional platforms and institutions as opportunities to raise improved asthma care as a core priority on the policy agenda

National policymakers, and especially policymakers within the European Union, should leverage platforms such as the EU Council Presidency to highlight the need for improved asthma care and communicate the Union-wide benefits of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to asthma care for patients, health systems, and economies alike. These are also opportunities for countries to share success stories and facilitate the transfer of domestic best practices throughout the region.

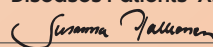
In undertaking these actions, European stakeholders in particular should seek to work with, leverage, and grow from existing platforms and initiatives for advancing health policy and improving health outcomes, such as the Healthier together – EU non-communicable diseases initiative, that list chronic respiratory diseases as a main priority.

In recognising the urgent need for concerted and collaborative action, we the undersigned acknowledge and intend to immediately support stakeholders in undertaking the above activities aimed at improving severe asthma care, both independently and together with relevant partners. In doing so, we acknowledge the need to draw on our own expertise as well as support from our networks to the greatest possible extent.

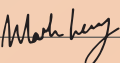
Sir David Behan
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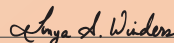
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