



For immediate release

MEPs voice concern over budget cuts to lung health and warn of knock-on effects amid fresh COVID outbreaks and climate change

Brussels, 21 February, 2024 – MEPs Tomislav Sokol, Radka Maxová and Stelios Kypourouopoulos have voiced their concern over the recent EU Commission decision to divert €1bn from Europe's largest health programme at a lung health campaign launch event today. Respiratory disease alone costs the EU 422 billion euro annually.ⁱ

Speaking at the launch event of the #KeepBreathing campaign, organised by the European Lung Health Group (ELHG), an informal grouping of 179 patients and healthcare professional associations, **MEP Sokol** said: "This is a major problem. We have to fight to get this funding back as soon as possible. What we had in terms of budget cuts is a 20% decrease in EU4Health programmes...not to mention the fact that only really a small percentage is dedicated to lung cancer and other lung diseases."

MEP Maxová said: "We try to change [the] mind of the European Commission to take so much money from the budget, but if we don't win this fight, then I would like to say that [the cuts] should be divided the same way for all sectors in healthcare. What is crucial is having resilient health care systems to address inequalities in the European Union, and to face current and health future challenges, like lung health is."

MEP Kypourouopoulos said: "The lungs are so important for life and yet lung diseases persist as silent killers, we need not to focus only on one disease but the whole spectrum of disease. We need to stand up and make the discussions in order to see especially in the next mandate how we can not only increase [the budget dedicated to lung health] to 20% but further to see results in the area of research and innovation. Also, an overall strategy to address lung health at European level has to be prioritised."

Though 1 in 8 deaths are caused by respiratory diseases in the EU,ⁱⁱ most conditions affecting the airways and the lungs are preventable and manageable. 87 million Europeans currently live with a lung disease, according to the World Health Organisation,ⁱⁱⁱ and the burden on society is increasing. Climate change and Europe's worsening air quality are resulting in more deaths from respiratory diseases and decreasing the quality of life of those who live with lung health-related issues.^{iv}

The event marked the launch of the #KeepBreathing campaign, which seeks to raise awareness about lung health, widely considered to be a misunderstood and overlooked issue in Europe. The current EU4Health budget 2021-2027 totals 5.3 billion Euro of which only 5 million Euro is allocated to respiratory disease.

Marcia Podestà, EFA President, said: "Patients with respiratory disease witness a clear mismatch between the importance of preserving lung health and the cuts on the budget to achieve the European Health Union. The resources are far from reaching the ambition. Lung health, in the three key areas of prevention, care and research, requires attention and investment. 9 in 10 Europeans consider respiratory diseases to be a serious problem in their country^v. That is enough of a signal for more targeted, collaborative and resourced action on lung health at EU and national levels."

Dr Eva Polverino, ERS Director of Scientific Relations with the EU, presented the latest statistics on lung health in Europe. She said: "The respiratory health burden in Europe is larger than ever and it is expected to increase with the ageing of the population and the effects of climate change on health. It does not make sense





to reduce spending for lung health at EU level in key areas. This must change if we want to make an impact on respiratory health of the European population. Without research we cannot expect a better future."

Speakers also discussed the vulnerability of Europe's population to COVID-19 and climate change, and stressed the need for an official EU body with legislative powers to tackle health issues.

MEP Maxová said: "The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the very strong vulnerability to respiratory diseases, therefore we should prioritise lung health. It would enhance the ability of healthcare systems to respond effectively to future respiratory challenges."

MEP Kypouropoulos said: "It's well known that extreme weather events can impact the quality of the air and contribute to worsening respiratory issues that can be chronic but also lethal."

MEP Sokol said: "What we can do in the European Parliament is to give more priority to health in general. Currently we have the same committee in the Parliament which is in charge for environment and health.

"So what we'll be pushing for, my political group and myself, in the next mandate is that we don't have sub-committee on health like we have now, but a really fully-fledged separate health committee with full legislative powers."

The #KeepBreathing campaign

#KeepBreathing urges policymakers to take action across three key areas – prevention, care and research – under the next EU mandate. A strong policy towards lung health will improve and save millions of lives, lessen the strain on Europe's ailing healthcare systems, and better prepare the bloc for future health crises.

Better lung health and preparing for the challenges of tomorrow

Lung health is a determining factor in overall societal health. The total cost of poor lung health in Europe is estimated at 611 billion EUR.^{vi}

COVID-19 has shown that lung health is Europe's Achilles heel; a weak point in many national healthcare systems. Also, recent heatwaves, wildfires and the lasting consequences of floods hitting the EU have underscored just how vulnerable we are in the face of climate change. These extreme weather events, which are becoming normal, have the effect of both exacerbating existing respiratory conditions and exposing otherwise healthy people to risk factors that can cause their lung health to deteriorate.

The European Lung Health Group policy brief "**#KeepBreathing: A vision for EU action on lung health 2024-2029**",^{vii} published today, presents three areas of action offering sustained, focused and achievable actions to develop EU policies which are coherent for lung health:

- **On prevention**, it is a pressing public health need that the EU and Member States address education gaps, improve air quality indoors and outdoors, commit to eradicating smoking and increase early screening rates, vaccinations and lung health checks.
- **On care**, patients and healthcare professionals call for initiatives and resources to ensure early and accurate diagnosis for patients to enable better respiratory treatment as well as better follow-up to save and improve lives.
- **On research**, there is an imperative to match the burden of lung disease with the investment it receives, moving towards well-funded, patient-centric research to enhance today's levels of prevention and care and to discover the cures of tomorrow.

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Notes to editors

A recording of the event is available at: <https://youtu.be/Oo711y01gCQ>

The European Lung Health Group

We are an informal group of European level non-profit organisations gathering 179 patients and healthcare professional associations across 34 European countries. Our mission centres around bringing together know-how to support our organisations in empowering patients with lung diseases, improving early diagnosis, optimising multidisciplinary care, progressing quality of life, and research.

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ⁱ International Respiratory Coalition, Lung Facts – Europe, 2019: <https://international-respiratory-coalition.org/countries/europe/>

ⁱⁱ Lung health in Europe, Facts & Figures, European Lung Foundation, 2013: ers-education.org/lrmedia/2013/pdf/238593.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ International Respiratory Coalition, idem

^{iv} European Respiratory Society, Dr Eva Polverino presentation at the event, 2024:
https://efanet.org/images/2024/MEP_Lung_Health_Group_event_-_KeepBreathing_-_Dr_Eva_Polverino_ERS.pdf

^v European Commission, Directorate-General for Environment, Attitudes of Europeans towards air quality – Report, European Commission, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2779/91313>

^{vi} International Respiratory Coalition, idem

^{vii} European Lung Health Group, #KeepBreathing: A vision for EU action on lung health 2024-2029, 2024:
https://www.breathevision.eu/images/KeepBreathing_A_vision_for_EU_action_on_lung_health_2024-2029.pdf

