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## **WORLD ASTHMA DAY**

### **A CALL FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF CHRONIC ILLNESS**

*The European Respiratory Society and FIRS mark World Asthma Day  
During 2010: The Year of the Lung*

BRUSSELS — The European Respiratory Society (ERS) and the Forum of International Respiratory Societies (FIRS) are marking World Asthma Day, May 4, with a call for greater understanding of the disease, more awareness of its social and economic impact, and a boost to funding for research to get a better grasp of its causes, and to find a cure.

Additional impetus comes from the [2010 the Year of the Lung](#) campaign, launched to raise awareness of the importance of lung health. The ERS and campaign partners are seeking to remind policy makers that asthma is responsible for 250,000 premature deaths annually around the world, and this figure continues to grow<sup>i</sup>.

#### **Social and economic impact**

According to WHO figures, asthma affects some 300 million people worldwide. It is one of the most prevalent chronic conditions and is unequivocally *the* most common chronic disability for children in the developed world. Asthma affects some 30 million people in Europe, and about 3-5 children in a school class of thirty pupils. In Europe the annual asthma-related costs amount to some €20 billion, while the estimated economic loss due to days off work is about €10 billion<sup>i</sup>.

*“Asthma affects up to one third of the entire population. This is a similar proportion to other malignant diseases such diabetes, which, however, generally begin in later life, whereas asthma begins early on and continues throughout the patient’s life<sup>iii</sup>. This has a significant impact upon the cost of care, which will be much higher due the long-lasting nature of the disease,”* said Kai-Håkon Carlsen, Professor of Paediatric Respiratory Medicine and Allergology at the University of Oslo.

#### **Asthma treatment and research**

There is still no cure for asthma but, with medication available today, attacks can be prevented. Most asthma sufferers who receive proper treatment and take it correctly are able to lead normal lives. However, numerous patients suffer repeatedly from severe

exacerbations often demanding emergency care and hospitalisation. This results in a high economic burden on themselves, their families and society in general.

What is sorely needed is continued investment in the field of epidemiology, basic and clinical research to understand the causes, the risk factors and the underlying disease mechanisms. The lack of a curative treatment for asthma is, along with issues such as an ageing population and air pollution, one of the most significant challenges facing our societies today.

In the words of ERS President Prof. Nikos Siafakas, *“The major unmet need in asthma care is the means to treat difficult or severe asthma. Severe asthmatics represent only a small percentage of the asthmatic population (10% or less), but account for a large portion of the healthcare costs associated with the disease [...] Severe asthma is a high priority for innovative research and an emphasis on continued, focused and strategic investment in existing European research networks in this field would provide a response to Society’s grand challenges in healthcare and in an ageing population. It would also contribute to general wellbeing and a productive workforce.”*

#### Notes to the editor:

**Asthma:** Asthma is an umbrella term. There are many different types of asthma including difficult-to-treat asthma (so-called severe asthma, which can be fatal). Asthma cannot be cured, but it can be controlled with modern medication so that attacks can be prevented. Many patients suffer repeatedly from severe exacerbations, often demanding emergency care and hospitalisation, which also places a high economic burden on the families and on society. Broadly, asthma can be divided into two categories: allergic asthma and non-allergic asthma. Asthma often starts in childhood, but it can happen for the first time at any age – even in people in their 70s or 80s. Its symptoms are caused by inflammation of the airways making them red, swollen, narrower and extra-sensitive to irritants. Asthma is caused by a mixture of genetic and environmental factors e.g. air pollutants, pollen, chemicals, environmental tobacco smoke, but how these factors affect each other is still largely unknown.

**More info about asthma:** <http://www.who.int/topics/asthma/en/index.html>

**More info about World Asthma Day, see:** <http://www.ginasthma.com/WADindex.asp>

#### ERS and the 2010: The Year of the Lung

The European Respiratory Society (ERS) seeks to raise awareness of lung health and improve prevention, management and treatment of respiratory disease. The leading professional organization in its field in Europe, it is broad-based, with some 10,000 members in over 100 countries and a scope covering both basic science and clinical medicine. ERS activities comprise organizing scientific and educational events; devising and making available educational materials through distance learning or seminars; and publishing a series of landmark medical journals. More at [www.ersnet.org](http://www.ersnet.org)

2010 Year of the Lung seeks to heighten the public’s awareness of lung health, initiate action in communities worldwide and advocate for resources to combat lung disease, notably through increased investment in basic, clinical and translational research worldwide. More information on the European *Year of the Lung* activities, see: [www.ersnet.org/yearofthelung](http://www.ersnet.org/yearofthelung). More information about the 2010 *Year of the Lung* see: [www.2010yearofthelung.org](http://www.2010yearofthelung.org).



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<sup>i</sup> M. Kupczyk, T. Haahtela, A. A. Cruz, P. Kuna. Reduction of asthma burden is possible through National Asthma Plans. *Allergy* 2010; 65: 415-419

<sup>ii</sup> European Lung White Book. The first comprehensive survey on respiratory health in Europe. In: Loddenkemper, R, Gibson GJ, Sibille Y, editors, European Respiratory Society, *ERSJ* 2003:16-25

<sup>iii</sup> To T, Wang C, Guan J, McLimont S, Gershon AS. What is the lifetime risk of physician-diagnosed asthma in Ontario, Canada? *Am J Respir Crit Care Med*. 2010 Feb 15;181(4):337-43.