

A breath of fresh air?

Strong progress in the treatment and management of allergic conditions should not cause us to overlook possibilities for prevention, writes **Anne Stauffer**

Some surprising EU policy changes could have everyone breathing more easily, and especially those with underlying respiratory problems. In five years' time, half of all Europeans are expected to suffer from at least one allergy. Estimates suggest one in four children have some type of allergy. Hospital admissions for asthma started to grow 30 years ago prompting more research funding into its likely causes. The evidence shows that polluted air not only contributes to causing respiratory conditions, it also aggravates existing problems. Some of the effects are relatively mild but the exacerbation of asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) can be fatal. The EU estimates that 350,000 deaths per year are attributable to air pollution.

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) aims to highlight the link between environmental pollution and the increasing rates of certain chronic diseases, including asthma and allergies. The objective is to show how EU and government policy changes can help prevent such conditions. We advocate policy change and work with doctors, patients and other groups to make the links between environmental factors, such as air pollution, and health problems more widely known.

In recent years, the EU has adopted a considerable body of legislation on air quality. The challenge now is to ensure that EU member states implement the law in full and without further delay. This is especially important given the negative effects

of climate change on air quality. Rising temperatures and more heat waves in Europe will increase the adverse effects of air pollution on health and make allergy seasons longer. Air pollution increases as temperatures rise. The commission predicts steep increases in mortality, chronic bronchitis, hospital admissions and patient days on medication due to air pollution exposure if nothing is done to mitigate the effects of climate change over the next ten years.

A report commissioned by HEAL, WWF and Climate Action Network shows that if the EU attained a reduction on greenhouse gas emissions of 30 per cent (from 1990 baseline levels) by 2020, up to 28 million days of "restricted activity" due to respiratory conditions could be avoided (compared with a scenario in which no action was taken).

The associated savings in health costs are estimated at up to €76bn each year by 2020. Changes in both energy and transport policy would help respiratory health. Energy technologies must become less air polluting and a reduction in exhaust fumes from vehicles is needed. The effects of cleaner air resulting from less traffic pollution would be particularly valuable for those with respiratory conditions. Strong climate change policy – as well as good air quality regulation – is good for reducing allergies, asthma and other respiratory conditions. Indeed, the higher the achievements in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving air quality, the greater the chance for everyone to breathe more easily. ★



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The conference concluded with a call to action, by GA²LEN's Torsten Zuberbier, to develop a community action plan to reduce the health impact of allergic diseases, which would focus on establishing an EU-wide surveillance network to monitor the sensitisation of patients, look to improve the diagnosis and treatment of allergic diseases, continue funding and promoting pan-European research on allergic diseases, improve the standard of allergy care in Europe and raise public awareness.

The conference also heard from several other policy experts including Jan de Monchy, of the European Union of Medical Specialists, who agreed with the GA²LEN diagnosis that only around 10 per cent of sufferers receive proper medical attention, and told the conference that the levels of treatment and diagnosis differed widely across Europe. De Monchy, a professor of allergology said, for example, that about 68 per cent of patients with an allergy in the UK went undiagnosed. "There are large differences between EU countries, within EU countries and even within different hospitals. Such differences are clearly not ideal," he said.



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Feed the world

Food security can only be achieved with significant productivity improvements, says **Cristiana Muscardini**

Food security – the certainty of a sufficient, safe and nutritious food supply – is now a key political priority both at EU and global level. As a direct consequence of the unprecedented and unpredicted steep increase in global food commodity prices, the EU has decided to reduce its trade activities between exporter and importer countries of food stocks which are characterised by a continuous decrease at a critical level.

A key challenge for us, as policymakers, is to design valuable agriculture and food policies to meet the needs and the security of an expanding EU and extra EU consumers' population. The impact of higher commodity prices has been also exacerbated by actions taken by important food exporting countries, such as Brazil, Argentina and Thailand, in placing export taxes and restrictions on food exports in attempts to address internal food demand concerns.

Given that the domestic production of developing countries do not come close to securing food supply for their rapidly expanding population, the increasing food import needs of developing countries can only be met if industrialised countries produce and export more food. This will therefore require productivity improvements in the agricultural sector, which are difficult to achieve both at international and European level.

At international level, it is worth noting the importance of a quick reopening of WTO talks on the issue of food security, which failed because of Indian and Chinese concerns about the impact of import surges on their rural populations – an issue which was raised by commissioner-designate Karel De Gucht during his confirmation hearing at the European parliament. Putting food security at the heart of any future WTO deal, and establishing fair trade rules while recognising each country's concerns about national food security, may help provide the impetus for concluding the endless Doha round.

Regarding current EU trade policies, it is important to consider economic partnership agreements as a deal to ease the fruitful south-south relations between poor countries, increasing their domestic development and providing their food stock supply.

Of course, the EU still has a lot to do. In order to avoid a reduction in food supply, it has to steer agri-fuel production towards the use of second generation technology and revise and adapt agri-fuel production targets on the basis of clearly



Incoming EU trade commissioner Karel De Gucht raised the issue of food security during his hearing at the European parliament

identified economic, social and environmental criteria. But food security is not only a problem of developing countries. It is also a problem for industrialised ones, which have the right to guarantee the health of their consumers through a strong food supply chain.

During the last parliamentary term, the European parliament approved a regulation on transparent labelling concerning the need to improve the information available to EU consumers about the food chain, advocating mandatory indications of place of production of primary products via a 'made in the EU' or 'non-EU' label. We believe that it will be an important step in both improving the health of EU consumers and increasing the economic development and quality of agriculture markets, which is necessary if the food supply chain is to improve. In fact, it is extremely important to improve access to markets for small land holders and local farmers, helping the achievement of global food security through employment security programs, preventive school feeding, and early-child nutrition plans. These are important tools that link farmers with their markets and therefore increase the amount of quality foods in international chains. ★



Cristiana Muscardini is vice-chair of parliament's international trade committee

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