

# Global Impact of Respiratory Disease

## What Can We Do, Together, to Make a Difference?



Stephanie M. Levine, MD, FCCP

San Antonio, TX

Darcy D. Marciniuk, MD, Master FCCP

Saskatoon, Canada

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The third edition of the *Global Impact of Respiratory Disease*<sup>1</sup> begins with the statement “We take our breathing and our respiratory health for granted, but our lungs enable us to live, laugh, love, and enjoy activities.” At no time in our recent history has that truth become more evident and more relevant. The COVID-19 pandemic, in a short period of 24 months, has claimed the lives of > 5.7 million people,<sup>2</sup> largely all from respiratory causes. But even before the pandemic, three respiratory diseases were entrenched in the top 10 causes of death in the world.

**ABBREVIATIONS:** WHO = World Health Organization

**AFFILIATIONS:** From the University of Texas (S. M. Levine); and the Department of Respiriology, Critical Care and Sleep Medicine (D. D. Marciniuk), University of Saskatchewan.

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**CORRESPONDENCE TO:** Darcy D. Marciniuk, MD, Master FCCP; email: [darcy.marciniuk@usask.ca](mailto:darcy.marciniuk@usask.ca)

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COPD is the third-leading cause of death worldwide, killing 3.2 million individuals every year and accounting for an astounding 81.7% of the total number of deaths from chronic respiratory disease. Pneumonia is a leading cause of death among children < 5 years old outside the neonatal period and in adults > 65 years old. Lung cancer is the deadliest of nearly all cancers, with 5-year survival rates of only 10% to 20%, even in developed countries. We know that asthma is the most common chronic disease of childhood, and the prevalence of asthma has been rising for the past three decades. TB would be the greatest single infectious cause of death if it were not for the current COVID-19 pandemic, with an estimated 500,000 new cases of rifampicin-resistant or multidrug-resistant TB in 2019 alone. In addition to the top five conditions mentioned here, the report also highlights the significant global burden of sleep-disordered breathing, pulmonary hypertension, occupational lung diseases, in addition to the harmful effects of air pollution and climate change.

The *Global Impact of Respiratory Disease*<sup>1</sup> was compiled by the Forum of International Respiratory Societies, a coalition of the leading international professional societies in the world. Together, the American College of Chest Physicians, American Thoracic Society, Asian Pacific Society of Respiriology, Asociación Latinoamericana de Tórax, European Respiratory Society, International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union), Pan African Thoracic Society, Global Initiative for Asthma, and the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease joined in the collective goal of empowering respiratory health worldwide through global advocacy. These societies continue to work hard to reduce the global burden of lung disease and to ensure everyone can and is able to breathe freely. The third edition of the *Global Impact of Respiratory Disease* is an important step; it provides the means for meeting those goals, outlines major causes of respiratory disease and death, and lays out clear recommendations for global action. The executive summary of the report has been translated into eight languages.

But the report goes far beyond only highlighting the problems and consequences. Representing > 100,000 professional members worldwide who care about lung health, the Forum of International Respiratory Societies

also clearly identified the following eight essential actions to reduce the burden of respiratory disease and improve global health.

1. Improve public and policy makers' awareness that respiratory health is vital to global health and that childhood respiratory disease has long-term negative consequences on adult health.
2. Reduce, and then eliminate, the use of all tobacco and smoking products.
3. Adopt and adhere to World Health Organization (WHO) standards, at a minimum, to reduce ambient, indoor, and occupational air pollution for all countries.
4. Implement universal access to quality health care, including the availability of affordable, quality-assured, essential medicines and universal coverage for all effective childhood and adult immunizations.
5. Improve the prevention and early diagnosis of respiratory diseases.
6. Increase education and training of health care professionals in respiratory disease worldwide.
7. Standardize the monitoring and reporting of the prevalence, severity, and management of respiratory diseases to enable development of better-informed national strategies through programs of WHO and governmental and nongovernmental organizations.
8. Boost funding for respiratory research to develop programs, tools, and strategies to better prevent and treat respiratory disease.

So you might be thinking "What can I do to help make a difference?" or maybe "This is so big and complicated: what can really be achieved?"

Those are great questions, as are the answers.

Imagine if, together, we could influence policies or decision-makers to further enable respiratory health? What impact could we make if we acted together to further reduce the harmful effect of tobacco and work towards completely eliminating smoking? What would be the impact of better trained and supported health care professionals working together and health care systems and policies that more effectively aided the prevention and optimal management of lung disease for all? What investment in respiratory research and researchers would lead to breakthroughs, to cures, and to a future in which our children, all around the world, could almost take their breathing for granted because lung diseases were not listed prominently in the top ten causes of death in the world? What more could we do, either as members of these societies or as individuals who fully

appreciate the destructive forces of lung disease and the benefits of respiratory health, to advance these tangible outcomes?

Let's talk specifics and specifics close to home.

Imagine better access to pulmonary rehabilitation and supplemental oxygen therapy, more available and affordable medications and therapies, and health care systems that are accessible and served everyone. Imagine equitable access to quality care and populations that we serve with descriptors that do not begin with "disadvantaged" or "underserved." Imagine funding for training and respiratory research that is equitable and aligned with the enormous burden of respiratory disease and that more completely nourishes the genuine possibilities of breakthroughs and cures afforded by our researchers and research teams. One easily could imagine even more.

The pandemic has highlighted starkly the reality that what is far away can become so close to home in a matter of days. The world's issues are inexplicably our issues. The pandemic has also shown that what we do locally can help many far beyond our own borders. And all of us who have cared for patients know that someone who is short of breath, no matter where they live or work or play, is suffering.

The *Global Impact of Respiratory Disease*<sup>1</sup> has made clear the consequences, around the world, of lung diseases and the benefits and the path to respiratory health. Let us now together eliminate that suffering and amplify the benefits of working together in our own clinics and our own hospitals and laboratories, not only for those individuals we care for, but also for millions of other patients around the world.

The next edition of this report is proposed to be co-developed with the WHO for release in 2025 at the High-Level United Nations NCD Meeting. This publication will be aimed specifically at a target audience of high-level health care policy makers and will include an Executive Policy Briefing with recommendations directed at both global and national levels.

There is much work to be done before that next step.

## References

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