



European Medical Students' Association

Association Européenne des Étudiants en Médecine

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Clean Air for Europe

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The European Medical Students' Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.

Problem Statement

Air pollution is the largest environmental health risk in Europe, accounting for more than 400,000 deaths per year (EEA, 2019a). Globally, air pollution is considered as the fourth highest cause of death among all health risks, accounting for 43% of all deaths and disease from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 29% of lung cancer, 25% of ischaemic heart disease, 24% of stroke, and 17% of acute lower respiratory infection (HEI, 2018; WHO, 2020). In the European region, the main pollutants are from the burning of fossil fuels in the industrial sector and households, road transport, shipping and agriculture (EEA, 2019b). At city-level, fuel-based vehicles (i.e. cars, buses and motorbikes) are the single most important source of air pollution (Degraeuwe et al., 2019). A study by CE Delft (2018) showed that this passive transport accounts for €67 to €80 billion of social costs, of which 83% is caused by the use of diesel vehicles. The majority of European cities have air pollutant levels above the EU limit values and the more strict World Health Organization (WHO) Air Quality Guidelines (ACQ) (EEA, 2020). At the same time, the air pollutant CO₂ is a driver of human-induced climate change, putting the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at risk (WHO, 2018).

Our View. Aim.

EMSA recognises air pollution as a pressing public health issue and emphasises the co-benefits of action against air pollution in the fight against physical inactivity and climate change. The measures introduced during the COVID-19 lockdown, although extreme, has shown us the immediate benefits of reducing the number of cars on our streets: air quality improved.

As representatives of European medical students, EMSA takes the responsibility to take steps for clean air. EMSA has organised online campaigns and webinars to raise awareness among their members. Also, as a partner in the Clean Air project, which is coordinated by the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), EMSA participates in the clean air debate in European cities. Our aim is to engage (future) health professionals, specifically (future) doctors, in our actions against air pollution and to create awareness in the public about the health damage of air pollution and health co-benefits of actions for clean air, such as the transition from passive to active mobility.

Recommendations

EMSA calls upon European Institutions and healthcare agencies to:

- Stimulate active mobility at the city-level by funding grassroots initiatives.

EMSA calls upon national governments to:

- End the sale of new diesel and petrol vehicles by 2028, while progressively phasing out existing polluting vehicles from urban areas.

EMSA calls upon all European cities to:

- Realise a zero-pollution environment in 2030 by formulating legislative responses. These responses should include urban planning, enforcing low-emission zones for highly polluting vehicles, and supporting their citizens to make the transition towards active transport, taking into account socioeconomic inequalities.

EMSA calls upon all national medical organisations to:

- Include the detrimental effects of air pollution on health and the possible preventive measures in the medical curriculum and in continuous professional development.

EMSA commits itself to:

- Organise capacity building activities to give future health professionals, especially future doctors, the knowledge and skills to take action on the organisational and individual level.
- Create an advocacy platform to engage students on the European level in the fight against air pollution.
- Avoid air travel to international events of EMSA (e.g. EMSA General Assemblies and EMSA European Board meetings) and promote active transport during events.

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