Travelling with a lung condition

Survey and workshop report
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Introduction

The aim of the travelling with a lung condition project is to find out how to make air travelling easier for people who require assistance in breathing, so that their lung condition and their needs do not cause any additional stress or discomfort.

Most people who require assistance in breathing can now travel safely by air if they make plans in advance. But the rules and regulations to sort out practicalities vary greatly between airlines and sometimes they are not easy to find or understand.

In the past, the European Lung Foundation (ELF, http://www.europeanlung.org) and the European Federation of Asthma and Airways Diseases Patients’ Associations (EFA, www.efanet.org/) have worked in this area; published a list of airline and airlines policy to facilitate air travel with oxygen in Europe and advocating for policy change.

This year, to help us improve practicalities of travelling by air for people with a lung condition, the European Lung Foundation has asked healthcare professionals, people who need to travel with oxygen, their carers and relatives to complete a short questionnaire and share their experiences

Results of the surveys were presented at a workshop held on 6 September 2016 at the ERS International Congress in London, where participants discussed how to improve practicalities of travelling by air and the steps required to carry out these changes.

The present report summarises the findings from the surveys and the workshop and highlights the next steps for the project.
Survey results

Methodology

The methodology used for both surveys used mixed-methods web-based questionnaires, developed from themes in the literature. The healthcare professional survey was co-produced by healthcare professional members of the ELF Professional Advisory Group. The patient survey was designed on the basis of patients’ accounts of air travel experiences which ELF received in the past years. The patient survey was translated in 9 languages (English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Russian and Polish). The professional survey was available in English only.

Both surveys were online from June 2016 – August 2016.

“Your experiences of assessing respiratory patients for air travel”

Healthcare professional survey results

Healthcare professionals are increasingly asked to assess a patient’s respiratory fitness to fly by the airline they will be travelling with. The aim of the survey was to find out how to compare experiences on providing medical advice and guidance.

Respondent characteristics

A total of 196 healthcare professionals from 57 countries responded to the survey, 16% of respondents replied from the UK and several respondents replied from Portugal, the Netherlands and Spain. Most healthcare professionals worked in secondary care (75%). The survey highlighted that healthcare professionals receive requests to release a medical certificate on average at least once every 6 months, although the frequency depends on the period of the year, with more requests before and during summer months.

There is still a lack of knowledge among both patients and physicians about this topic. Also, there is an ongoing debate on the kind of test to be performed.

Secondary care specialist, the Netherlands
What are the obstacles?

### What are the obstacles to producing the certificate?

- **Medical certificates vary greatly**: 2%
- **Timeline set by the airlines**: 19%
- **Patients leaving it too late**: 20%
- **Lack of information on travelling with oxygen**: 15%
- **Importance of the respiratory assessment underestimated**: 15%
- **Difficulties accessing a local protocol or screening tool to perform the assessment**: 7%
- **Other**: 2%

Healthcare professionals outlined that patients lacking information on travelling with oxygen is one of the key obstacles in producing the certificate (22%). They also reported that the importance of respiratory assessments is often underestimated (20%).

As for the medical examination, healthcare professionals across Europe reported difficulties accessing a local protocol or a screening tool.

What would make it easier?

### What would make it easier to release such a certificate?

- **A standardised medical certificate for all airlines**: 38%
- **A standardised procedure**: 32%
- **More awareness of the importance of assessment**: 22%
- **Certificates that are valid for longer**: 15%

A standardised medical certificate for all airlines would facilitate the release of the form (38%), together with a standardised procedure for the examination (32%) and an increased awareness of the importance of the assessment amongst patients (22%).
“Your experiences of travelling with a lung condition”

Patient survey results

The rules and regulations to sort out practicalities vary greatly between airlines and sometimes they are not easy to find or understand. The aim of the survey was to identify and understand challenges faced by people travelling by air with a lung condition.

Air travelling with a lung condition gave me stress and anxiety

Respondent characteristics

A total of 96 respondents completed the survey from 18 countries worldwide. The majority of respondents were based in Europe, with 38% from Germany, 34% from UK. 75% of respondents were patients themselves, whereas 25% of respondents were relatives or carers of someone who needs to travel with oxygen.

What are the obstacles?

Patients highlighted that one of the main obstacle is to find reliable information on airline oxygen policies (19%). Bringing their own oxygen portable concentrator (POC) on board was also highlighted as a main obstacle when travelling by air (12%), as well as planning the journey...
and organising the logistics behind it (11%), and the physical impact of the journey itself (11%), which may causes further fatigue and stress.

What I have found confusing is that there is no uniformity of information. All airlines give different information.

What would make it easier?

Patients highlighted that a standard medical certificate used by all airlines would make their travel easier (19%), as well as more clear and reliable information on airline policies (16%). In terms of logistics and planning, more assistance when travelling is needed and a standard procedure to bring their own POCs on board (12%)

Based on the two survey results, potential improvements could focus on:

- Providing reliable information that is easy to access
- Providing standard certificates and standard procedures for assessment
- More flexible rules for taking POCs on board
Workshop results

The workshop took place at ExCel Congress Centre during the ERS International Congress in London on 6 September 2016. There were 15 participants, of which three were healthcare professionals, six patients, four representatives of patient organisations and two representatives of industry (POC providers). The workshop featured the presentation of the survey results and included three problem-solving breakout sessions. Each group included patients, healthcare professionals and industry representatives.

Using the findings of the surveys as a basis, problem-solving breakout sessions focused on:

**Practicalities of travelling with a lung condition**

The group discussed the practical arrangements that patients with a lung condition need to consider or sort out before travelling by air. The group discussed Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 concerning the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air. The EC Regulation establishes that:

- Disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility, should have opportunities for air travel comparable to those of other citizens
- Disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility should therefore be accepted for carriage and not refused transport on the grounds of their disability or lack of mobility,
- Airlines’ charges are proportionate to the assistance provided to disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility. Charges should be adopted and applied in full transparency.

Regarding practicalities, participants highlighted:

- the need for an easy-to-read and clear guide which includes the steps required
- more guidance when patients are in airport and at their destination airport
The group proposed a **step-by-step checklist** as a basis for further information.

1) **Allow plenty of time to book your flight and arrange oxygen**
2) **Speak to your GP / consultant**
3) **Check airline policy on how oxygen is provided**
   *(Which POC is allowed? How many per flight? How many carers?)*
4) **In case of doubts, contact airlines directly**

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1) **Check airport map for distances and travel**
2) **Contact the airport**
3) **Arrange assistance with the airline and airports**
Guidance on medical certificates
Medical certificates vary greatly. A standardised medical certificate would benefit both healthcare professionals and patients. The group who focussed on this during the workshop analysed three different medical certificates requested by major airlines. Both healthcare professionals and patients have stressed the need for a standardised certificate, which can be easily recognised by airlines and easy to understand by those not medically trained. Both healthcare professionals and patients would welcome a standardised certificate including relevant information.
Participants have established that the certificate should ALWAYS:

- be different for adults and for children
- be specific about the condition of the passenger
- contain information on any accompanying person/escort
- be specific about oxygen flow rate

Participants have agreed that any information on the type of treatment and medication they are on is not strictly necessary.
As for the testing, healthcare professional believe new guidelines and standards for the examination should also be standardised and promoted and believe ERS could be in a position to set the standards.

Taking oxygen on board
The group focussing on this during the workshop looked at the practical side of bringing oxygen on board a plane, highlighting the key stages, the main stakeholders involved and the main difficulties.
Participants have identified 5 different phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. at the starting airport</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. take off</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. while cruising</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. landing</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. at the destination airport</td>
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And the following stakeholders:

As a result of the workshop, the group has put together a checklist for patients on how to travel with a POC in an effortless way.

4) Check with airlines which POCs are allowed
5) Check battery requirement – consider the time you will spend at both airports!
6) Check on airport map where plugs are located or contact the airport directly
7) Bring information about your POC with you (instructions and warranty)
8) Arrange assistance at the airport/airline both at home and destination airport
9) Ask to be boarded and to disembark first or last

Sit down on your seat, arrange your POC and relax
Next steps

ELF is committed to continue to bring together patients, healthcare professionals and stakeholders to further develop the air travelling with a lung condition project.

The present report and any outcome of the workshop will be published online on ELF website in the section dedicated to air travel with a lung condition. ELF will continue to collaborate with the European Federation of Asthma and Airways Diseases Patients’ Associations (EFA, www.efanet.org/) on the topic and encourages patients from all over Europe to send their account of their air travels with a lung condition. EFA is also working to launch a new comparison website allowing patients to compare airline’s fares and policies.

In 2016-2017, ELF will work towards the provision of the following deliverables:

- **template for a standardised medical certificate**

  The template includes all relevant points and issues raised by medical professionals and patients. The document may be used as a basis for discussion with other stakeholders.

- **guidelines and protocol for the assessment of fitness to fly for patients with a lung condition**

  ELF will raise the issue with ERS, which is in a position to produce and promote guidelines for the assessment of fitness to fly.

- **infosheet on POCs**

  The infosheet will be co-produced with patients and industry. It will be short and easy to read.

  Information on POCs will be distributed to airline personnel, airport personnel and contracted airport staff (security and health and safety), including airline and airport personnel in Milan, where the ERS International Congress 2017 will take place. Milan is connected with three airports and it is the hub of a large number of airlines, so it would be an excellent location to raise awareness on the topic.

- **list of commonly accepted POCs**

  A list of POCs currently accepted by airlines will be published online on ELF website.
Finally ELF, together with ERS, is planning to hold a Symposium on air traveling with a lung condition during ERS International Congress in Milan in 2017. The Symposium will give the chance to represent the views of patients and healthcare professionals on the topic.

Read more and stay updated on air travelling with a lung condition:

**Air travel airline index**

**Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006**

concerning the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air.