

Improving asthma management at the primary health care level

In 2005, the El Salvador Ministry of Health's National Tuberculosis and Lung Disease Programme adopted the PAL strategy (Practical Approach to Lung Health), as part of its efforts to improve health care for patients with respiratory diseases, including asthma. Since then, the programme has improved the care of the asthma patients at health care facilities throughout the country.

Between 2005, when PAL was started, and 2010, the number of patients being referred from primary level to secondary or tertiary level facilities has dropped by 60%.

Developing country guidelines

When PAL was adopted, country guidelines were developed for the standardised care of asthma patients. They were then included in the new 'Guide for the care of patients with asthma, pneumonia and COPD at primary health care level'. Clinical protocols and flowcharts showing how to manage asthma patients were also developed.

Managing asthma

These guides, protocols and flowcharts are now present in all primary health care facilities run by the Ministry of Health (MoH), as well as its national hospitals, which also provide asthma care. Training in asthma management is provided to the whole spectrum of health care workers who should be involved in asthma care: general doctors, specialist doctors, nurses and health promoters, who work in the community visiting patients in their homes.

Care of asthma patients often begins with the health services identifying them in emergency rooms. Acute asthma attacks are managed according to guidelines based on GINA recommendations. Long-term asthma care includes peak flow measurements, spirometry and standardised treatment with quality-assured medicines (salbutamol, beclometasone, etc.) and spacers. The medicines are purchased by the MoH, with some coming through the Asthma Drug Facility. They are then provided free-of-charge to patients when they visit their health centre.

Expanding implementation

The national asthma guidelines were developed with broad input from existing clinical guidelines and experts such as paediatricians, lung specialists and internal medicine specialists, as well as experts from other parts of the health sector, such as the



Social Security Institute and medical associations. The guidelines are therefore relevant for all health care providers, not only the MoH. The MoH is currently applying these guidelines in 100% of its own health care facilities, and it is starting to expand implementation to other health care providers.

Ongoing improvements for asthma care

Uptake of the guidelines by doctors has progressively improved. The programme is currently updating the guides, incorporating lessons learnt from implementation over the years and from a recent project supported by The Union. Since the introduction of the peak flow meter and some innovations in the information system, the programme has noted that the diagnosis, treatment and follow-up of patients have improved. Between 2005, when PAL was started, and 2010, the number of patients being referred from primary level to secondary or tertiary level facilities has dropped by 60%, meaning substantial savings for the health services and care that is more convenient for patients.