

# It is Time that Respiratory Therapists Prioritize “Asthma Care for All”

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Asthma is a chronic respiratory disease easily diagnosed with clinical history and objective tests such as spirometry and impulse oscillometry. With the correct medication prescribed through inhalers, it can be managed well, and the patients can lead a normal or near-normal life.<sup>1</sup>

The Indian pharmaceutical industry has made all types of inhaler devices available at affordable rates to our patients as compared to their foreign counterparts. But then, what is the problem? The problem is that more patients suffer from asthma in India than in any other country.<sup>2</sup> In fact, India is a leader, with an estimated 34.3 million patients suffering from asthma.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, India contributes to 43.11% of asthma deaths, which is the highest in the world.<sup>2,3</sup>

Despite the most advanced technologies and the brightest minds, doctors do not have enough time to attend to our patients. Our asthma patients suffer due to a lack of appropriate treatment. Those patients who are prescribed inhalers aren't educated on how to use them correctly and do not receive proper counseling regarding the treatment. Patients trained to use the inhaler correctly during the first visit tend to forget the steps within a day.<sup>4</sup> Several myths and misconceptions about inhalers and inhaled corticosteroids deter the patient from taking the appropriate treatment. Furthermore, once the patients feel better, they discontinue the inhaler treatment without consulting the doctor. This additionally worsens the patients' disease and ultimately burdens our healthcare systems.

Asthma can be managed well with the right treatment and proper education and counseling.<sup>5</sup> The question then arises that with the lack of time the doctors have to give their patients, who could ideally help them? And the answer is respiratory therapists (RT)!

Respiratory therapists (RTs) have been unsung heroes for respiratory care patients. A perfect example was the care given by them in the unprecedented times of the last few years.<sup>6</sup> Our acute care facilities, including the intensive care units, were flooded with very sick patients who were looked after by RTs. However, as we work through the COVID-19 pandemic and other acute care illnesses, we mustn't lose focus on the chronic respiratory diseases that cripple the healthcare systems in India.<sup>7</sup> This is the opportunity for RTs to showcase their skills and knowledge as experts in respiratory care.<sup>6</sup> RTs are trained to adapt to the advances in device technology and treatment recommendations. RTs have a big role to play in diagnosing asthma correctly. There is a desperate need for trained professionals who can conduct screening and diagnostic pulmonary function tests such as spirometry, impulse or lung oscillometry, and peak flow meter, among others.<sup>8</sup> Since these tests are objective and are effort-dependent, a minor

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deviation in the quality leads to incorrect results, which can lead to the inappropriate treatment of the patient. Hence it is crucial that the person who performs the test knows every detail of the test, from the correct technique, correct quality check, and interpretation. Apart from that, newer molecules of medications are being introduced, which are going to be predominantly used for asthma management in the future.<sup>9</sup> Here lies the opportunity for RTs to understand the science behind the molecules and guide the patient in need. Patients with asthma, just like any other chronic respiratory disease patient, require more attention from the healthcare professional. During the patient's first visit, there are many aspects of disease management that the doctor has to deal with, such as diagnostic tests and making a confirmed diagnosis, prescription, explanation of the prescription, disease counseling, addressing myths and misconceptions, etc.<sup>5</sup> This is where RTs should step up and take over the majority of the workload from the doctor and dedicate their time to the asthma patient. RTs are great counselors who can convince skeptical patients why inhalers are the best mode of treatment and why they should adhere to them. They also need to be educated on the correct technique for using the inhaler device. A study has shown that the patient forgets approximately half of the steps of using the inhalers within the first day of teaching itself.<sup>4</sup> This means that reinforcing the technique over several periods of time is necessary so that the patient attains mastery of the device's use. This is important because asthma control worsens with every step that the patient forgets or does incorrectly.<sup>10,11</sup> The patient also needs to be explained the disease dynamics, triggers and avoidance of triggers, and seasonal variation in the symptoms. The asthma action plan that the doctor should make for the patient is an excellent tool for educating the patient. Reaching patients through online and telemedicine platforms will be a necessity that the RTs can fulfill. Apart from clinical management, other auxiliary work where RTs can contribute is generating new knowledge through research

studies and teaching other healthcare professionals about the diagnosis and management of asthma.

With changing times, we must take a hard look at reality and focus more attention on asthma. A disease that is well managed on inhaled medications cannot be why patients lose lives in such huge numbers. As an elite group of respiratory experts, it is our responsibility to create more public awareness about the disease for those who lack the understanding, provide support to those patients who need it, and ultimately aim at reducing the disease burden in the country. The Global Initiative for Asthma (GINA) realized the need to create more awareness and hence organized and celebrated World Asthma Day every year in the month of May since 1998.<sup>12</sup>

This May 2023, we must join them in working towards GINA's theme of "Asthma Care for All."<sup>12</sup> This editorial is a call to action. It's time to educate and dive deep into chronic asthma management in India.

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