



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **WORLD-LEADING EXPERTS CONVENE IN KOTA KINABALU TO COMBAT RESPIRATORY DISEASE BURDEN**

Lung or respiratory conditions are responsible for one in five deaths globally. Asia is a region severely affected by high levels of illness and deaths due to lung diseases. In Malaysia, lung diseases are one of the top three causes of hospitalisation and death. This week, lung health experts from across the world will convene in Kota Kinabalu to further cross-country collaboration and showcase the breadth of research being conducted to decrease the burden of lung disease across Asia.

The NIHR Global Health Research Unit on Respiratory Health (RESPIRE)'s Annual Scientific Meeting runs from 29 July to 1 August 2025, and is the research unit's first time convening a conference in Sabah since its inception in 2017, highlighting the need for further investment into lung health research in the region.

The four-day meeting will open with an officiating speech by Datuk Dr Nor Fariza Ngah, Deputy Director-General of Health (DDG) of Research from the Ministry of Health, Malaysia, who will reflect on priorities to ensure better respiratory health in Malaysia. Research teams will present the latest from their studies and discuss ways forward to improve respiratory health on local and global scales.

### **Respiratory diseases have a major impact on the Malaysian & Sabah Health System**

Chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and post-tuberculosis (TB) lung disease affect a significant population in Malaysia. According to the National Health and Morbidity survey in 2023, 6% of adults and up to 13% of children have asthma, while around 1 in 3 sufferers remain undiagnosed. In another study, it is estimated that 6.5% of adults have COPD, which leaves many affected patients breathless with a poor quality of life. The cost of managing COPD is tremendous and is estimated to be at RM 2.3 billion annually. The financial burden is further compounded by decreased workforce productivity and increased social welfare costs. Although there are no specific statistics for Sabah, it is believed that the situation is similar to the rest of Malaysia, and more efforts are being made to improve the screening and diagnosis of these conditions.

Sabah has the highest incidence of TB in Malaysia at 161 cases per 100 000 population, which presents unique challenges for its public health system. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that globally, 10 million people have TB disease each year, yet only 7 million are diagnosed and notified into a national surveillance system. Working closely with the Sabah Health Department and Ministry of Health Malaysia, RESPIRE researchers are looking to identify the 'Missing Millions' of people who are undiagnosed through the development of a clinical algorithm which aims to diagnose smear negative pulmonary TB in resource-limited primary care settings.

Despite coronavirus outbreaks positioning respiratory health as a key public health concern, there is an ongoing need for local and regional research to provide the evidence needed to implement best practice and care. In addition to the Ministry of Health Malaysia's *Healthy Lung Initiative 2025-2030*, the recent 78th World Health Assembly adopted a landmark resolution on lung health titled 'Promoting and prioritizing an integrated lung health approach', with Malaysia playing an active role as one of its key proponents and recommenders. The resolution emphasises an integrated approach to strengthen national and global actions for prevention, diagnosis, and management of lung conditions such as asthma, COPD, lung cancer, pneumonia and tuberculosis, with primary care as a key entry point. It also calls for improved access to affordable care, greater investment in clean air policies, and integrated strategies linking lung health with broader efforts on non-communicable diseases and climate resilience. With the support of collaborations like RESPIRE, governments and policy makers can draw on findings to inform policy to improve respiratory health for all.

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## Notes to Editors

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## About the NIHR Global Health Research Unit on Respiratory Health (RESPIRE)

RESPIRE aims to reduce the number of deaths and wider health and societal impacts from respiratory diseases in South Asia.

Co-led by the University of Edinburgh and Universiti Malaya, RESPIRE partners based in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka collaborate to deliver low-cost, scalable policy and clinical interventions to reduce respiratory disease and death in Asia. RESPIRE's research programmes cover infectious diseases - for example tuberculosis and pneumonia, non-communicable diseases - including asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, preventable risk factors - such as air quality and tobacco usage, and the impact of climate change on respiratory health.

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Learn more at [usher.ed.ac.uk/respire/](http://usher.ed.ac.uk/respire/) or @RESPIREGlobal on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter/X](#) or [Facebook](#)

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- partnering with patients, service users, carers and communities, improving the relevance, quality and impact of our research;
- attracting, training and supporting the best researchers to tackle complex health and social care challenges;
- collaborating with other public funders, charities and industry to help shape a cohesive and globally competitive research system;
- funding applied global health research and training to meet the needs of the poorest people in low and middle income countries (LMICs).

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