



# What Will It Take to Get Cinderella to the Ball? *Putting Chronic Respiratory Diseases on the Map*

**José Luis Castro**

**WHO Director-General Special Envoy for  
Chronic Respiratory Diseases**



**10 June 2025**

Thank you for the opportunity to close today's discussion.

You might have noticed this session has an unusual title, but I think it's all too fitting - because chronic respiratory diseases have long been treated like Cinderella: overlooked, underfunded, and kept far from the spotlight while everyone else gets to go to the ball.

But we're changing that. And what it will take is exactly what we've already started doing together - making the case that these diseases matter, not just medically, but socially, economically, and politically.

Our progress - getting chronic respiratory diseases (asthma and COPD) on the policy agenda where they belong - starts with visibility. If they remain invisible in the public imagination, they will remain invisible in policy priorities. Simple as that. That's why we can't be shy. That's why we have to make noise. That's why we've launched a series of initiatives designed to change how people see these diseases—and who sees them.

The first: media engagement. We've begun training health journalists around the world to report on chronic respiratory diseases with the urgency and depth they deserve. In April, we convened 15 leading journalists in Mexico City for a first-of-its-kind training. Our next session will be in Malaysia. Already, these efforts have led to more than a dozen articles and radio programs—compared to just one story the previous year. By the way, that story? It was an obituary.

We can and must do better - we have to tell these stories before it's too late, not only to honor the victims. Our mission should be to prevent those obituaries from being written, at least for a long, long time.

The second step: political engagement. We are working to build a caucus of parliamentarians committed to advancing chronic respiratory disease policy. These champions will help ensure this issue stays on the agenda—not just during moments of crisis or commemoration, but year-round, across governments.

The third: public engagement. We're now commissioning the development of a public strategy to shift the face of chronic respiratory diseases - through awareness campaigns, storytelling, and creative outreach. I hope to have more to share soon as we move forward together.

But that's not all. We are also forging alliances beyond health. That includes outreach to sectors like finance, labor, education, and housing, because we know the conditions that shape lung health don't begin or end in the clinic. Meanwhile, we are working closely with climate and environmental organizations to address the shared drivers of both planetary and pulmonary harm.

We are elevating patient voices. We are organizing more effectively. And we are pushing this agenda in the places that matter.

The last several months have been a whirlwind. Since September, we've worked closely with the UN Task Force on Noncommunicable Diseases, presenting to over 40 UN agencies. We've launched outreach to the G7 and G20 countries. And this summer, we'll participate in two major events, one in China and one in Brazil, focused specifically on chronic respiratory diseases.

In September, ahead of the UN High-Level Meeting on NCDs, there will be not one but two side events dedicated to chronic respiratory diseases: one with the Danish government, which will hold the EU presidency; and the other by European Respiratory Society, WHO, and the UN Task Force on NCDs.

This is what it looks like to get Cinderella to the ball. We can't just hope to be invited. We have to show up and knock on the door - with allies, with evidence, and with a plan.

But let me end with a note of caution. Visibility is not victory. We've made progress - but this is still a highly competitive field. Other diseases command more attention, more resources, more headlines. We can't let chronic respiratory disease stay in the shadows - not when we know the scale of suffering, and not when we know how much difference we could make.

So let's keep showing up. Let's keep raising our voices. Let's keep fighting to make sure that the next time someone asks, "What will it take to get Cinderella to the ball?" - we can say: she's already dancing.

Thank you.

---

*Remarks delivered at the Increasing Access to Inhaled Medicines for COPD and Asthma webinar co-hosted by the Forum of International Respiratory Societies, NCD Alliance, NCD Policy Lab, and the World Health Organization on 10 June, 2025. A recording of the event can be found [here](#).*