

Time to act on Antibacterial resistance

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Opinion

The threat from antimicrobial resistance continues to be underestimated. What are governments and stakeholders doing to tackle this growing threat to global public health?



Growing concerns surrounding the lack of research and development in the pipeline for new antimicrobial therapies | Photo credit: Adobe Stock

Health ministers of the G20, meeting for the first time last month in Berlin, agreed to work together to tackle issues including the growing resistance to antibiotics, building on the work of agricultural ministers who committed to limiting veterinary antibiotics exclusively to therapeutic uses.

German Chancellor Merkel reiterated that the link between resistance through livestock and humans was “very obvious”. She further outlined the antimicrobial resistance (AMR) challenge during a speech at Imperial College London where she said, “the importance of antimicrobial resistance is underestimated.”

It has an impact on livestock and humans alike, and these challenges should be considered together. We have problems including the over-prescription of antibiotics and the urgent need to develop new ones". At the World Health Assembly in 2015 Merkel described AMR as "an issue of crucial importance for the entire human race" and warned that if we want to ensure our antibiotics remain effective they should be used, "only when medically necessary - not only when treating humans, but animals as well."

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Speaking during the G20 Health Ministers Summit, she said that failure to act on antimicrobial resistance could result in resistance, "spreading more quickly and aggressively than it does already". The Health Ministers' declaration asserts that AMR has a severe impact on the lives and well-being of millions of people as well as on the global economy.

Ministers committed to implementing national action plans by the end of 2018 and to strengthening "monitoring and surveillance of both antimicrobial resistance and the consumption of antibiotics in their respective countries." In the run-up to the conference, German health minister Hermann Gröhe warned, "the world risks a return to the pre-penicillin era if leading nations do not cooperate to combat the threat from antibiotic-resistant bugs and means are not found to finance research into new, more effective medicine."

He added, "the world isn't sufficiently prepared for the outbreak of dangerous illnesses - Ebola proved that." Such an outbreak would have "dramatic consequences," he said. Responding to these concerns, G20 Health Ministers pledged to improve their ability to react to pandemics and health risks. Last year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution acknowledging that AMR would become the world's leading cause of death.

Worryingly, the first human cases of the mcr-1/NDM-1 bacteria - resistant to virtually all available antibiotics - were detected in Thailand, Venezuela, the United States and China - notably Hangzhou, the host city of the 2016 G20 Summit. A Chinese expert group estimated an initial outbreak could cost the Chinese economy €64bn. Trade, investment, and tourism will also fall victim to AMR.

Highlighting German and Chinese leadership in addressing AMR, WHO Director General Dr Margaret Chan recently expressed her hope that Argentina will to continue tackling this issue when they take on the G20 presidency in 2018. Addressing the G20 Health Ministers in Berlin," She explained that

health is a transboundary issue with environmental, agricultural and economic aspects, and that the public would only accept the G20's approach if progress was made across several fields.

Meanwhile Hermann Gröhe stressed that “dangerous diseases and antimicrobial-resistant pathogens do not stop at national borders. They cause unspeakable human suffering and can dramatically set back the social, economic and political development of whole countries.”

Ministers said they were concerned about the lack of research and development (R&D) in the pipeline for new antimicrobial therapies and highlighted the importance of fostering R&D for new antimicrobials, alternative therapies, vaccines and rapid-point-of care diagnostics, in particular for priority pathogens as identified by the WHO and tuberculosis.

Despite the urgency of tackling antimicrobial resistance, the G20 could not agree on de-linking the cost of investment in research and development on antimicrobial resistance from the price and volume of sales. According to Marco Alves, coordinator of the Access Campaign of Médecins Sans Frontières, “to have de-linkage mentioned in the text would have been very promising”, and potentially longer patent terms on the other hand would go in the wrong direction.

AMR: TIME TO ACT

German health minister Hermann Gröhe, European health and food safety commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis and a range of high level speakers are set to debate what actions are required to tackle the scourge of antimicrobial resistance at an event in the European Parliament on 28 June.

Co-hosted by MEPs Adina-Ioana Vălean, Pavel Poc and Fredrick Federley, the event, “Scientific, human health, husbandry and Socio-economic aspects of antibacterial resistance: Time to act” will hear from speakers from around the world on the challenges facing health authorities as they attempt to address the constantly increasing rate of antimicrobial resistance.

The event, co-organised by the PA International Foundation, will hear keynote addresses from renowned experts in the field of AMR, including Marc Sprenger Director World Health Organisation AMR secretariat, the Director and Deputy Director of the institute of animal sciences at the Chinese academy of agricultural sciences, Zhang Junmin, and Chen Jilan and Diederik Standaert, head of management office, DG animal, plant and nutrition, Belgian Health Ministry, and Former Belgian national representative to the standing committee on plants, animals, food and feed and many more. Venue: European Parliament A3E-2

28 June 2017 14.00-18.00 hours

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