Tackling AMR requires a collective approach

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Keeping antibiotics working is everyone’s responsibility, argues ECDC chief, Andrea Ammon.

For decades, we have been using antibiotics as our primary weapon to treat bacterial infections. Today, we face one of the biggest challenges of our times: we are struggling to curb infections caused by bacteria that were once susceptible to antibiotics. They have become resistant to the action of these medicines. The situation is complicated by a lack of new antibiotics discovered and marketed in recent years.

The emergence of bacterial strains which are resistant to several antibiotics, known as multidrug-resistant bacteria, as well as bacteria resistant to last-line antibiotics is a major problem. This a particular problem in hospitals and other healthcare settings, as it severely limits treatment options for infected patients.
Without effective antibiotics, we could return to the so-called “pre-antibiotic era”, where organ transplants, cancer chemotherapy, intensive care and other medical procedures would no longer be possible.

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Fighting antibiotic resistance requires a multifaceted approach, where communication, awareness raising and behavioural change play a pivotal role, along with improved infection prevention and control measures and antibiotic stewardship.

Since its launch in 2008, European Antibiotic Awareness Day (EAAD) - an initiative coordinated by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) - has provided a platform for the development and support of national campaigns across the EU and other European countries. It raises awareness around antibiotic resistance and advocates for the more prudent use of antibiotics.

This year marks the 10th EAAD, an important milestone but also a moment to reflect on what has been done over the last decade. Since its inception, more than 45 European countries have marked EAAD at least once, in cooperation with the World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Office for Europe.

Several partnerships have been established with similar campaigns in other countries including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, ensuring that all the initiatives take place at around the same time and that communication messages are aligned. EAAD has also provided inspiration for the World Antibiotic Awareness Week (WAAW), an initiative led by WHO. EAAD now partners with WAAW.

At the ECDC, we have produced a set of template communication materials, aimed at supporting the activities carried out in European countries to build comprehensive and consistent communication campaigns with a focus on the prudent use of antibiotics.

To date, these materials have addressed the general public, primary care prescribers and professionals in hospitals and long-term care facilities. They are made publicly available through a specific EAAD website.

Over the past ten years, EAAD has also played a role in keeping the issue of antibiotic resistance high on the political agenda. The annual release of the ECDC surveillance data on antibiotic resistance and antibiotic consumption, as well as organising events, following a one health approach, brings together professional organisations with an interest in the topic. These include EU institutions, representatives from member states and relevant media from these countries.

Our statistics show that antibiotic resistance is continuing to increase for most bacteria and antibiotics under surveillance. Nevertheless, the progress and success of some EU member states is
encouraging; it shows that it is possible to turn the tide on antibiotic resistance and ensure that antibiotics remain effective in the future. But we must act now.

Keeping antibiotics working is everyone’s responsibility. As individuals, we are potential users of antibiotics when facing bacterial infections, or we may be the parents of children or caregivers of other family members that need to be treated with antibiotics.

Thus we need to know how to use these medicines prudently. Professionals such as doctors, veterinarians, pharmacists, nurses and farmers have an additional responsibility to use antibiotics wisely. Furthermore, policymakers are in a key position to drive change at national and local levels.

Both individual and collective responsibility are the focus of this year’s EAAD. This will be emphasised during an event on 15 November in Brussels.

We have also launched social media initiatives where we are asking policymakers, governmental institutions, professional and patient organisations - as well as healthcare professionals and the general public - to show the actions that they are taking to address the problem of antibiotic resistance. Anyone can take part by sharing messages, pictures or videos during the week of 13-19 November on different social media channels, using the hashtag #KeepAntibioticsWorking.

We believe that joint action can lead to concrete results in the fight against antibiotic resistance. At the ECDC, we are committed to continuing our efforts, together with EU member states, stakeholders and the EU family, to keep antibiotics working.

About the author

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