

Action on antimicrobial resistance: It's about time (and we're running out)

by TIM REED

If the words 'antimicrobial resistance' (AMR) don't set your pulse racing out of fear, a read of the World Health Organization's (WHO) new global [AMR surveillance report](#) will help.

✘The report paints a disturbing picture of the extent of AMR around the world. In some places, resistance to common bacteria is so far gone that treatment options for simple infections are no longer effective. Also troubling is the lack of antibacterial resistance (ABR) surveillance, which the WHO describes as, "neither coordinated nor harmonised." Quite simply, we just don't know the full extent of the AMR threat.

The information contained in the WHO's report shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone. Public health officials have been warning for years that unless we, as a global community, take urgent action, the post-antibiotic era—in which common infections and minor injuries kill—will soon be upon us. Even Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin, cautioned us on the potential perils of AMR back in 1945.

But who's listening and acting? More importantly, who isn't?

Doctors and pharmacists must heed the message to only prescribe and dispense antibiotics when truly needed. Consumers must comply with instructions to take the full course of their antibiotic treatments. And policy-makers at all levels and in all countries must recognise the importance of quickly implementing policies that improve infection control or prevention, amongst other strategies.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) also play an important role. We must continue to lobby for changes to the current profit-driven model of pharmaceutical innovation because it doesn't provide an incentive for research and development of new antibiotics. We must advocate against the aggressive marketing of antibiotics by pharmaceutical companies, which leads to irrational use. We must press for improved access to appropriate antibiotics, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. And we must also push for an end to the use of antibiotics in animal agriculture.

CSOs have been working on this. As a matter of fact, in Geneva last week, 50 CSOs from around the world, including Health Action International, met to establish a global alliance on ABR and develop a plan for action and engagement in the international debate. Additional details will be released in the coming weeks.

The WHO's report, although not perfect, offers a glimpse of the post-antibiotic world—and it won't be a nice place to live. Let's hope that the WHO's message that we, as a global society, are on the precipice of a new reality in which we may become unimaginably vulnerable is

finally heard, and that each of us uses this report as a tool to spark action and find solutions to the growing AMR threat.

(Image courtesy of cuteimage / FreeDigitalPhotos.net.)