Antimicrobial resistance: A threat that can no longer be ignored

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During the European Health Forum, representatives of the pharmaceutical industry, EU institutions and patient associations discussed the next steps in fighting the ever-growing threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

From accessibility and incentives for research to awareness among the general public, they talked about this worrying public health issue that continues to rise worldwide.

Antimicrobial resistance occurs when bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites change over time and stop responding to medicines, which complicates the treatment of infections.

We see its effects more and more in our health systems: Every year, more than 670,000 infections are registered in the EU due to bacteria resistant to antibiotics, with 33,000 deaths as a direct consequence, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

At the same time, in 2019, it was estimated that AMR costs the healthcare systems of EU countries around €1.1 billion every year, and the number is set to increase in the next year as AMR is on the rise and the development of new antimicrobials is still slow.

In this special report, EURACTIV follows the conversations around AMR, focusing on efforts to contain it in the EU and globally.
Antimicrobial resistance not just a European issue, Malta minister says

By Marta Iraola | euractiv.com

Languages: Deutsch

Christopher Fearne, Health Minister of Malta, during the European Health Forum 2023.

When combined with a global approach, cross-country collaboration and measures will be vital to solving the issue of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), according to Health Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Malta Christopher Fearne in an exclusive interview with Euractiv.

AMR is often called the ‘silent pandemic’, and it accounts for 4.9 million deaths annually worldwide, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) data. The conditions are caused by the misuse and overuse of antibiotics, which lead to some microorganisms, called superbugs, developing antimicrobial resistance, making medicines less effective and infections more persistent.

During the European Health Forum (27 September), Fearne urged attendees to tackle antimicrobial resistance (AMR) beyond the EU level.

“If this problem is only looked at at the European level, it will not be solved”. He added that, as with any other pandemic, microorganisms do not recognise borders, as COVID-19 demonstrated.

According to Fearne, AMR cannot be seen only as a European issue but needs to be addressed more comprehensively.

He mentioned the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) high-level meeting on AMR next year as a milestone to look forward to. “It’s an opportunity which I think we cannot squander”, he said.

This assembly has as its main objective to set clear global targets in the fight against AMR. Fearne recognised that previous health UN encounters – like the one on tuberculosis this year – may have failed due to “too vague” political declarations.

He also identified two main ways forward: funding and monitoring of implementation.

“We need to make sure that there is a funding mechanism, whether is a global fund, regional one or supporting governments to find the fund for their own action plans”, he explained.

Fearne highlighted the importance of national action plans as they will differ from country to country due to different needs and contexts.

Need for research and development

As drug-resistant bugs do not respond to existing antibiotics, developing new antibiotics is essential to combat evolving resistance.

But, according to the Progress Report by the Global AMR R&D Hub & WHO, there is no viable market for novel antibiotics the return on investment does not cover the costs of their development, manufacturing and distribution.

The WHO in 2022 said that since 2017, only 12 antibiotics have been approved, 10 of which belong to existing classes with established mechanisms of AMR.

Fearne called this a “problem”.

“We are running out of antibiotics faster than we are getting new antibiotics onto the market”, Fearne said.

He added that looking five or ten years from now, the situation is not promising, “Something has to happen to incentivise and address the market failure”.

The proposal for new pharmaceutical legislation proposed by the European Commission intends to address this issue with the new incentives scheme. It also targets the inequalities between countries regarding accessibility to medicines, research, and innovation of novel antibiotics.

Fearne mentioned that currently, the pharmaceutical industry has no obligation to offer its products to all member states, which, according to him, “makes no sense when we talk about solidarity among countries”.

“For citizens of the European Union, wherever you happen to be, if you are ill, you should have access to the best medicine”, he added.

The Commission is proposing incentives to companies that offer their products in all 27 member states. This aims to ensure the supply of innovative antibiotics across the European Union, which is currently not the case in many small countries like Malta, as Fearne explains.

However, while the new pharmaceutical rules should guarantee access to antibiotics in all member states, Fearne also proposes to look outside of Europe and link incentives to a more global vision of ensuring already established antibiotics in countries where their supply is still threatened.

In the meantime

With the conversation on pharmaceutical legislation unlikely to conclude before the end of the Commission’s current mandate and the UN General Assembly to take place in September 2024, there is a need for short-term solutions.

But doing nothing is not an option.

According to a report published by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), every US dollar invested across the health and food sectors to tackle antimicrobial resistance brings five times higher benefits.

“There is an economic cost to doing nothing, which is five times higher than doing something,” Fearne said, referring to the report.

He also stressed the need to work with health authorities and take cross-sector measures, with the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of collaboration across all branches of government and authorities.

Fearne added that what happens with climate, agriculture, and even the planning of our cities affects health.

However, he said, the general public and lawmakers outside health are still not aware of the extent of AMR.
AMR: Stability in research and development key, pharmaceutical industry warns

By Marta Iraola | euractiv.com

While novel antibiotics are critically important in the fight against antimicrobial resistance (AMR), the lack of security and incentives is setting development back, the pharmaceutical industry warns.

Antimicrobial resistance – often called ‘the silent pandemic’ – is an increasing concern to health policymakers. In 2019, AMR directly caused the deaths of 1.2 million people worldwide, while contributing to an additional 4.95 million deaths. In the scientific journal *The Lancet*, the Global AMR R&D Hub & WHO, there is no viable market for novel antibiotics and the return on investment does not cover the costs of their development, manufacturing and distribution.

Kevin Outterson, executive director of CARB-X, a nonprofit organisation focused on supporting the development of new antibacterial products, explained the need for incentives to boost the investment.

He cited an article published in the Wall Street Journal which showed that all six US companies that gained approval from the Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) for new antibiotics since 2017 are now bankrupt, have been acquired at a very low price or are in the process of shutting down.

Pol Vandenbroucke, from the European branch of Shionogi, a Japanese pharmaceutical company working in the development of antibiotics, agreed on the need for incentives that guarantee sustainability in the long term and predictability for inversion.

“It’s very important for us to know that ten years from now, all the investments we’ve made, all the failures that we’ve had, actually will be repaid in a significant way,” he added.

**The tricky issue of incentives**

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Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) poses a significant threat to the health of populations around the world. In Europe alone, approximately 100 people die of drug-resistant infections every day. This number is projected to increase significantly, with UN reports predicting that if urgent action isn’t taken, drug-resistant diseases could cause 10 million deaths every year globally. Huw Tippett is the Chief Executive of Shionogi Europe. We need to act now to ensure that future generations don’t inherit a world without reliable antimicrobials. At Shionogi Europe, we are committed to playing our part through developing robust anti-infectives, whilst working with others to ensure good stewardship of the precious armoury we have against deadly diseases.

Taking bold actions to find positive solutions

Finding solutions to this important challenge requires us to move beyond the traditional model of drug discovery and development. We know how difficult it is to find new antibiotics and the time and investment it takes to bring them to market only serves to highlight this urgency. We’re proud to be among the few pharmaceutical companies who continue to devote resource to research and development of anti-infectives and we take this commitment seriously. We invest the highest proportion of our revenues in relevant anti-infectives R&D compared with other large pharmaceutical companies.

However, our research alone won’t be enough – we need to work in partnership with diverse stakeholders to drive innovation for a new era. Put simply, to combat AMR we need to invest in research into new anti-infectives and build market incentives that ensure investment continues. But it is the responsible use of antibiotics and continued progress on infection prevention and control practices that will ensure we succeed.

Critically, this will require pharmaceutical organisations, life sciences companies, policy makers and healthcare professionals to come to the table with an open mind about the solutions we need to put in place. Whatever the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us is that in an increasingly connected world, when it comes to infectious diseases unless we are all safe, none of us are safe. Working together to unite around a single cause, private and public bodies can accelerate solutions to combat enormous healthcare challenges.

Collaboration is key to increasing awareness in Europe

At Shionogi Europe, we are helping to put this approach into practice. We’ve worked with policy makers in the UK and Sweden on world-leading pilot models that disrupt the way prescribing is valued and incentivised. We’re optimistic about the impact this work can have, but equally conscious that what’s right in one country might not be appropriate for another. What is important is the willingness to come together to work out approaches that can deliver the shared impact we all want to see.

AMR poses a critical threat to public health and demands urgent global action to combat its potentially devastating consequences. We owe it to society to all play our part, for the good of future generations.

We are committed to forging a more sustainable healthcare future in all its forms. Our work with the Global Antibiotic Research and Development Partnership (GARDP) and the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI) to improve and accelerate access to newer antibiotics for middle and lower income countries is just one way we are delivering on this commitment.

We firmly believe that by coming together with like-minded partners who are equally prepared to do things differently, Europe can lead the way in combating AMR. That’s why at this year’s European Health Forum Gastein, we have organised a dedicated session to harness the power of partnership across Europe.

Taking the lead when others may shy away

We are committed to addressing the critical threat to public health and demands urgent global action to combat its potentially devastating consequences. We owe it to society to all play our part, for the good of future generations.
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