

Lack of action on antibiotics a threat

Sir, The introduction of antibiotics in the 1940s led to a formidable revolution in healthcare, saving millions of lives around the world. Today, antibiotic resistance is common and so it is imperative that governments take responsibility to protect the few antibiotics effective against resistant bacteria and encourage discovery of new treatments. Unless governments act now, we will soon have an unprecedented global health crisis.

The number of antibiotic resistant bacterial infections is increasing and causing considerable problems and unnecessary deaths. In 2007, one group of antibiotic resistant bacteria, E. coli, caused 15,183 episodes of blood stream infections associated with 2,712 excess deaths and 120,065 extra hospital days. The total cost attributable to excess hospital stays was €18.1m (\$29.7m). Another study indicated that the cost of antibiotic-resistant infections to the US was about \$20bn per year. On European Antibiotic Awareness Day (November 18), and during Antibiotic Awareness Week elsewhere, we urge governments and policy makers to work together to ensure that there will be new drugs to treat bacterial infections. We also ask for measures to secure equitable global access and for policies for rational use to sustain antibiotic effectiveness to be introduced.

The problems are complex and the solutions myriad, so to do this at a global level requires partnerships between governments coordinated by a single organisation. We believe that this should be the World Health Organisation. Lack of action now threatens treatment of common infections and the success of other areas of medicine such as cancer chemotherapy. We implore government departments from health, to business, to overseas aid to join together to act now for all of us.

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