



Antimicrobial Resistance

A Call to Action

One of the great medical successes of the last 100 years is the advent and widespread use of antimicrobials. Countless millions of lives have been saved, perilous surgical procedures have been made safe and, lifesaving, but immunocompromising, treatments have been made possible. However, the very ubiquitousness and, at times, inappropriate extensive use of these antimicrobials is threatening their effectiveness. With disastrous effects. The emergence of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a real global medical threat. Already today, within the European Union and OECD countries, it is estimated that 1 in 5 bacterial infections are resistant to antimicrobials.

Last year the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021 (GBD 2021) Antimicrobial Resistance Collaborators published their predictions in *The Lancet*.¹ Between 2025 and 2050 AMR will be directly responsible for 39 million global deaths. Meanwhile, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are predicting that in 10 years' time a massive 90% of hospital-acquired bacterial infections will be resistant to antibiotics. Making hospitals and the way we deliver medical care today, obsolete. These are serious institutions pronouncing deadly serious statements.

Even worse, the problem extends beyond human health. Large-scale misuse of antibiotics as growth promoters in livestock has brought AMR into the animal sector. The World Organisation for Animal Health is warning that AMR will lead to animal production losses close to 1,000 billion euros over the next 20 years.² Leading in turn to issues of food security and increased hunger and poverty worldwide.

In the face of these existential threats, we need to act.

Malta has a National Action Plan for addressing Antimicrobial Resistance. And Malta has been actively campaigning for One Health action against AMR on a global level. (Last year, Malta was one of two co-facilitators bringing forward a United Nations General Assembly Declaration on AMR, which now forms the basis for global action).

But whilst AMR is a global problem, a large part of the solution is local.

Worryingly, the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) reports that Malta has very high usage of broad-spectrum antibiotics. The ratio of broad-spectrum to narrow-spectrum antibiotics is the second highest (after Hungary) in the EU/EEA region.³ Indeed, third-generation cephalosporins, and macrolides are frequently prescribed in a primary care setting. Paradoxically, whilst close to 2/3 of streptococcal respiratory infections in Malta are resistant to macrolides, only 5% are resistant to amoxicillin.

It gets worse. The research and development pipeline for new antibiotics is almost empty. We are running out of effective antimicrobials much faster than we can produce new ones.

How can we do our part to mitigate against this impending "silent pandemic"?

1. Antibiotic stewardship. Mediterranean patients are known to feel unsatisfied unless they are prescribed a medicine for their illness (or their pet's). As professionals, we need to lead. Our patients' present and future safety depends on our professional guidance.

2. Veterinary services need support to ensure proper veterinary governance, including vaccination, of local livestock.
3. The National Action Plan (which incidentally also covers the agricultural sector) needs full funding. Good intentions on their own are not enough. On the other hand, the OECD estimate a 5-in-1 return on investment in productivity savings for every euro spent on combating AMR. In other words, prevention is not only better than cure, but also cheaper than cure.
4. Internationally, Malta needs to continue to lead in this sector. The setting up of an International Independent Scientific Panel on Evidence on AMR (much the same as

with Climate Change) is a priority. Suffice it to say that according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2022, 10% of the world's population regularly ate food irrigated with untreated wastewater.

We are the first generation to have lived our whole lives with the benefit of the universal use of antimicrobials. For the sake of our children and grandchildren, we have the scientific and moral duty to ensure we are not also the last.

- 1 [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01867-1/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01867-1/fulltext)
- 2 www.woah.org/app/uploads/2024/09/ecoamr-woah-animal-sector-web-reduced-23924.pdf
- 3 antibiotics.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/A4-booklet-2023.pdf



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