

MEDIA RELEASE

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Conference Delegates Ask: Can Antibiotics From the Past Tackle the Growing Menace of Drug Resistant ‘Superbugs’ in the Present?

October 22: From today, Vienna plays host to a major international conference, convened by the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESCMID), where researchers, academics and representatives from pharmaceutical companies and national medical agencies will explore the potential and pitfalls of using first generation, off patent antibiotics to tackle the growing global threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

The three day conference, ‘Reviving Old Antibiotics’ has attracted participation from almost 300 delegates from 45 countries. They will explore the increasing threat of AMR, and the potential which exists for reverting to old and off patent antibiotics to treat today’s rapidly mutating and increasingly drug resistant ‘superbugs’.

In the past two decades AMR has emerged as one of the greatest threats to public health ever seen, with global agencies such as WHO and government institutions warning that without urgent remedial action the world is heading to a post-antibiotic age, where formerly treatable common infections will once again become fatal.

This crisis has come about as a result of a number of factors including over prescription of antibiotics; patient demand for unnecessary antibiotics to treat minor infections or viruses; unregulated access to antibiotics through pharmacies and online outlets; widespread use of antibiotics in agricultural practice to promote growth in livestock; poor hygiene practice in medical facilities; and the failure of the pharmaceutical industry to develop a new generation of drugs.

The European Centre for Disease Control estimates that 25,000 people in the EU currently die annually from infections that are resistant to multiple drugs. The economic cost associated with additional medical care for affected patients and loss of productivity is estimated at 1.5 billion Euros every year. The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention estimates the combined cost of excess direct health care and lost productivity to the American economy to be between \$55-70 billion.

“AMR threatens health care as we know it,” said Professor Gunnar Kahlmeter, ESCMID Past President.

“Many of the spectacular new practices and inventions in transplantation, cancer therapy, intensive and neonatal care and orthopaedics are at risk of having to be abandoned in those areas where multi-resistance is abundant. Once again mankind has failed in the basic ‘household management’ of one of its most precious and finest of resources.”

In the light of these challenges physicians are increasingly resorting to using old off-patent antibiotics that are still active against some drug resistant pathogens. These revived antibiotics were approved up to 55 years ago, however, and were not developed according to current standards of

science and practice. Continued use of these drugs without further study therefore carries significant downside consequences for individual patients as well as for the emergence of additional resistance. Information about adequate dosages, indications, toxicity, and usage in special patient populations may be missing or not be adequate any more.

“We are using some old revived antibiotics now which were developed in the early penicillin era,” said Dr Ursula Theuretzbacher, founding President of ESCMID, and current Chair of its Scientific Programme Committee.

“We are potentially risking the lives of patients due to inadequate usage of these antibiotics and also losing them due to emergence of resistance.

“Strategies are urgently needed to “re-develop” these drugs according to modern standards, integrating the new knowledge into regulatory frameworks, and communicating the knowledge from research bench to bedside. The ESCMID conference in Vienna will help to communicate and add to this new knowledge.”

Areas of focus at the Vienna conference will include ‘Optimisation of Therapy’, ‘Extending the Life of Old Antibiotics’, ‘Breakpoints and Susceptibility Testing’ and ‘Regulating and Communicating New Knowledge’.

It is intended that the conference outcomes will provide the global community involved in the struggle against AMR with some practical solutions to the use of old generation antibiotics, including recommendations about priority research, identification of what knowledge gaps need to be filled and what policy changes and funding actions are required.

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