

China and Sweden in Fruitful Summit on Antibiotic Resistance

Antibiotic resistance is one of the 21st century's greatest challenges to global health, with a direct effect on the health in all countries, whether wealthy or poor. Now China and Sweden launch a joint initiative to address this serious problem.

On April 28, the Swedish minister of public health Maria Larsson, visited her Chinese colleague Huang Jiefu, vice health minister, in Beijing to work out a joint strategy to halt antibiotic resistance. A large number of Swedish and Chinese experts also participated in the meeting.

Sweden and China have been discussing the issue during the last few years, and the fact that words are now being translated into deeds is the result of long-term work on the behalf of the international network ReAct – Action on Antibiotic Resistance, and of multiple Swedish-Chinese research projects run from the Karolinska Institute.

The starting points of the respective countries differ considerably; Sweden being a small country with a relatively small resistance problem, whereas China is the world's most populous nation and has a much heavier burden. However, China has initiated a radical reformation of its health system to deal with antibiotic resistance among other things.

– The Chinese antibiotic resistance situation is disquieting, yet it is hopeful to see the devotion, with which they now take on this challenge, says Professor Otto Cars, director of ReAct.

The relatively favourable situation in Sweden is to an essential extent owing to long-term nationally concerted efforts to halt antibiotic resistance through measures ranging from healthcare guidelines to promotion of rational drug use, i.e. when it comes to antibiotics, sparingly and only when medically warranted. This, however, has not been the case in China.

- Chinese doctors and hospitals have strong incentives to overprescribe antibiotics since drug sales to patients is a primary source of income, says Professor Göran Tomson of the Karolinska Institute.

- But the reformed health system includes an increase in the public financing, which will facilitate rational drug use.

The Chinese have expressed interest in testing the Swedish strategic programme against antibiotic resistance, by way of introduction as a pilot project in a limited region.

The next step in the Swedish-Chinese cooperation will consist of a Chinese expert delegation visiting Sweden in order to work out the strategies more in detail. Another meeting at the ministerial level is also being planned.

It is however not only to exchange knowledge and help to each other that China and Sweden now join forces, there is also an ambition to promote the issue in international contexts.

– The fact that China now takes on the challenge of halting antibiotic resistance renders the issue a new global force. Now we hope for other countries and, not least, the World Health Organization, to join us in a concerted effort, says Andreas Heddini of the Swedish Institute for Infectious Disease Control.