

Press release from the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation,

A new movement to tackle The Global Threat of Antibiotic Resistance

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR AT THE DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD FOUNDATION, UPPSALA, SWEDEN, 5–7 MAY 2004

Many of the bacteria that cause infectious disease are no longer responding to antibiotics. This threat to world health is escalating with potentially devastating consequences for rich and poor countries alike. Yet, as the impact of antibiotic resistance continues to grow, we see a paradoxical downward trend in development of new antibiotics. The first steps to create a new worldwide movement to preserve effective antibiotic treatment for present and future generations were taken last week at an expert meeting at the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden – a “*Greenpeace for antibiotic resistance*” as one participant described it.

Over 50 per cent of prescriptions for antibiotics are believed to be unnecessary. In addition, in many parts of the world antibiotics are bought directly from drug outlets without a prescription.

For many years doctors responded to resistance by switching patients from older antibiotics to newer ones. Along with the emerging resistance the supply of new drugs has declined as the pharmaceutical industry has shifted drug development from antibiotics into areas where the returns on investment are greater.

“Today, we need concerted action to prevent a return to the era before antibiotics when children more often died of pneumonia and a lot of major surgery was simply not possible because of infection”, declared Professor Otto Cars, one of the initiators of the seminar.

In severe cases, resistant bacteria more than double the risk that infection will end fatally. Most vulnerable are people with weakened immune defence, such as cancer patients and newborn babies. Resistance jeopardises advanced medical procedures such as organ transplantations and implants of prostheses because antibiotics are crucial for patient safety. The potential for harm is at least as great in the developing world. Here, many of the antibiotics, still effective against resistant bacteria, are unavailable and unaffordable.

Though medical professionals and scientists have documented the threat of resistant bacteria that move around the world rapidly, governments and international organisations have been slow to act.

“The inertia surrounding this global health issue is difficult to understand...”, noted one expert, *“...it’s not the sort of immediate danger that people can see around them, like AIDS and SARS...”*

The participants at the seminar represented a unique range of backgrounds, including the World Health Organization, health professionals, the research community, pharmaceutical industry, regulatory authorities, non-governmental groups, consumers, media and national authorities.

The worldwide movement proposed in Uppsala will be able to take effective action itself and work with others, including universities and consumer organisations. To achieve a sustainable future for effective antibiotic treatment, immediate action is required in three key areas:

- increase awareness of all parties, to get the issue firmly on the global and national agendas and achieve political action;
- find and promote sustainable ways to reduce irrational use of antibiotics, exploiting experience and knowledge that already exist;
- explore ways of ensuring development of new and better antibiotics.

“There has been plenty of talk about this problem...”, said Olle Nordberg, Director of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, *“Now we will take the issue a big step further with concrete short and long-term measures, carried out as part of a concerted action plan”.*

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