

BSAC Vanguard Series: Are we finally finding our voice on antimicrobial resistance?

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Modern medicine is a miracle, as recently demonstrated by the successful delivery of COVID-19 vaccines. However, the sad reality is that antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is simultaneously undermining our progress. We need to take urgent action to prevent devastating effects on lives, poverty and global development. Late last year, the heads of the World Health Organization, Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization came together to launch a new group of global leaders and experts from right across the world. I'm honoured to be a member of their Global Leaders Group. Many feel powerless in the face of AMR, but the truth is there are many things we can do. I outline some here, from simple but very effective steps such as proper handwashing, right through to putting consumer pressure on food suppliers to reduce reliance on antibiotics in the food supply chain. Change won't happen overnight, but we can and must make a difference.

Modern medicine is not just a miracle—with the breakthrough of a globally accessible, safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine, modern medicine is a reality. It gives the whole world hope for the years ahead. But the sad, simultaneous reality is that our modern medicine is being undermined. As our antimicrobial treatments become less effective, the goal of healthcare for all and the strength of our healthcare systems become more difficult to achieve. But if we work globally, to advocate and most importantly, to act, we can preserve antimicrobials for the humans and animals that need them.

We need urgent action to prevent antimicrobial resistance (AMR) from having devastating effects on lives, poverty and development. AMR is happening now, though you might not see it. My vision is simple: to keep it that way. To mitigate the despair and damage that AMR could cause. To secure our global health, happiness and the sustainability of the planet.

My vision is to make 2021 the year that counts and the year when the world got on with the advocacy and action to ensure that antimicrobials are accessible to those who need them most.

In the UK, we have a 20 year vision for AMR. By 2040, we hope to be living in a world where AMR is contained, controlled and mitigated. In practice, this means collaboration with other countries to share knowledge and data on what works, or what doesn't. Reducing levels of infections will mean giving our healthcare heroes the best possible tools to deliver healthcare for all. We must support them to prescribe antimicrobials effectively—whether rapid diagnostics to determine if antimicrobials are appropriate, or vaccines to avoid relying on antimicrobials. I also know that the public—as patients, animal

keepers, food consumers and activists—will be key to acting and holding others to account.

The world is moving on AMR, and I invite you to join us in this.

Late last year, the heads of the World Health Organization, Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization came together to launch a new group of global leaders and experts from right across the world. I am honoured to join the Global Leaders Group, to serve the international community and act to preserve the future of modern medicine.

Some advocates say that AMR does not have a face; but my hope is that the Global Leaders Group will give AMR a voice. We will show that the big statistics on AMR-related deaths and illnesses are more than just numbers: they are friends, relatives and colleagues who matter. We will ensure that AMR is at the top of our national and global agendas, and working for you and for our future.

A recent study found that here in the UK, less than half of adults know what they can do to help tackle AMR. We need this to change. My message is that *you too* can be a leader to turn the tide on AMR.

AMR is a complex issue; even after a decade of advocating for action on AMR, I am still uncovering more challenges and more evidence! But new evidence—on antibiotic pollution in rivers in India, on the levels of resistance in koalas injured in Australian bushfires, on the number of children lacking antibiotic access across the world—gives us even more reason to act. You can share these messages with your families or at work. We must spread the word that COVID-19 is not the only health challenge on our horizon.

The most important thing that each and every one of us can do is to wash our hands. We can use COVID-19 as an opportunity to make progress on tackling AMR, because so many more people are now practising good hygiene measures that protect against infection. Tragically, over 3 billion people across the world lack access to soap and water at home, the most basic of measures to protect against COVID-19 and other infections. We must advocate for sanitation and flushing toilets so that everyone can wash their hands.

Chickens and pigs consume more antibiotics than all humans combined: mostly inappropriately, to enhance their growth, not to treat them when they are sick. So, we should not underestimate the power of advocacy. Thanks to the collective voices of consumers, KFC have stopped supplying chicken reared with medically important antibiotics, and McDonalds have pledged to reduce the use of antibiotics in its global beef supply. You can drive these trends by buying and eating sustainable food.

Change won't happen overnight, but with every person who hears our messages on AMR, and with every antibiotic that is used responsibly, we can together move the dial. Future generations depend on it, but this generation can be the ones to save modern medicine.

Transparency declarations

This article first appeared as one of a series of blog posts celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the British Society for Antimicrobial Chemotherapy.

Further reading

- 1 Davies S. *The Drugs Don't Work*. Penguin, 2013.
- 2 UK Government. UK 20-year Vision. 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-20-year-vision-for-antimicrobial-resistance>.
- 3 UK Government. UK 5-year National Action Plan. 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-5-year-action-plan-for-antimicrobial-resistance-2019-to-2024>.
- 4 Pfizer. Change the Course: Create a New Future for Antibiotics. 2020. <https://www.pfizer.co.uk/change-the-course-a-new-future-for-antibiotics?cmp=8bf7b8c4-2097-4373-891c-69ca073feb4e&ttype=TW>.
- 5 University of York, UK. Antibiotics found in some of the world's rivers exceed 'safe' levels, global study finds. 2019. <https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2019/research/antibiotics-found-in-some-of-worlds-rivers/>.