

Superbugs: last call for action

By EU chief for Health and Food Safety, Vytenis Andriukaitis & Japanese Minister for Health, Labour and Welfare, KATO Katsunobu:

'Autumn is the season of the soul', wrote Virginia Woolf. She was right, the arrival of autumn brings with it the beautiful changing colours for us to contemplate with an awe. By the same token, but in a less romantic fashion, the fall also brings bacteria and viruses that are not only quick to spread but are highly contagious.

'Who cares about some common cold', you would think, 'a little bug will not kill us'. Beware, you might want to reconsider your assumptions as some of these bugs have already acquired superpowers: an increasing number of our weaponry - antibiotics - are becoming redundant due to a rise in antimicrobial-resistant bacteria or so called 'superbugs'.

Globally, 700,000 deaths each year can be attributed to infections resulting from antimicrobial resistance, which are as many as other infectious diseases that are global threats. Often the weakest suffer the most: new-borns, very young children and the elderly. Therefore, in societies who pride themselves on caring for the most vulnerable, such as the EU and Japan, we cannot treat the issue of antimicrobial resistance with complacency. The fight is now more than urgent, it is well past due.

The commitments we took in the G20 Okayama Health Ministers' Meeting have to be honoured. We know that antimicrobial resistance is a multi-faceted problem. Health Ministers alone will never solve the issue. Actions must be taken through the so-called One-Health Approach i.e. in the areas of human and animal health, as well as the environment.

In Japan, a National Action Plan was launched in 2016 and we have come to see the positive impact of a multi-sectoral approach. Japan we successfully reduced antimicrobial use in human by approximately 11% in 2018 in comparison to 2013 as a consequence of various efforts including publishing guideline on prudent use and incentivising paediatrician for refraining from prescribing unnecessary antimicrobials. In addition, we have been introducing to several Asian countries the surveillance system that aims to contribute to the early detection of nosocomial antimicrobial resistant infections.

At EU level, our One Health Action Plan against Antimicrobial Resistance, that is already yielding results, provides a framework for action to reduce the emergence and spread of antimicrobial resistance. Moreover, the new EU legislation on veterinary medicines and medicated feed puts forward stricter measures to fight antimicrobial resistance. Furthermore, EU guidelines, adopted in 2017, ensure the prudent use of antimicrobials in human medicine, similarly to those adopted for veterinary medicine in 2015.

A key prerequisite to beat antimicrobial resistance is simple: we must only use antibiotics when necessary. Here, vaccines, improved diagnostics or alternative therapies can help. When we vaccinate, we decrease chances to get infections and thereby turn to antibiotics. Today, we join our forces because antimicrobial resistance is a global level problem. Bugs have no borders and require no visas. We encourage to strengthen international frameworks. The consequences of inaction on antimicrobial resistance could be devastating for our world: 10 million deaths per year and EUR 100 trillion loss to the global economy by 2050. Therefore, the fostering of global partnerships, such as the one between Japan and the EU, will become increasingly important to safeguard our tomorrow.

As we mark the World Antibiotic Awareness Week 2019, the EU and Japan reaffirms our commitment to do the utmost to rollback antimicrobial resistance and equip future generations to protect themselves against untreatable superbug infections.