

U.S. government agencies admit antibiotic disaster

A coalition of 10 U.S. government agencies have issued a report that confirms what the World Health Organization (WHO) has been saying for years -- the overuse and misuse of antibiotics has resulted in a health crisis and must be stopped.

For years, the WHO has warned that the improper use of antibiotics has led to a strain of resistant "super-bacteria." Yet, many doctors continued to prescribe antibiotics needlessly, such as when a patient has a virus or other non-bacterial infection.

The interagency task force on antimicrobial resistance (AR) -- which included the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency -- issued a plan aimed at reducing the misuse of the drugs.

According to the report: "The extensive use of antimicrobial drugs has resulted in drug resistance that threatens to reverse the miracles of the last half century ... Unless AR problems are detected as they emerge -- and actions are taken quickly to contain them -- the world may soon be faced with previously treatable diseases that have again become untreatable, as in the pre-antibiotic era."

The report listed numerous actions which the medical community will need to take over the next five years in order to prevent the problem from becoming even worse.

The report specifically mentions the need to develop better medical drug use policies and to evaluate the impact of drug advertising on the demand for antibiotics.

One major cause of the current situation is the willingness of medical doctors to give them to patients who don't require them, merely because the patients either want or expect to have them prescribed. Rather than taking the time to educate patients, too many M.D.s simply write a prescription.

However, according to the Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics, "antibiotics are only useful in illnesses caused by bacteria, not by viruses. The common cold and flu are caused by viruses, not by bacteria. Antibiotics do not work against viruses."

SOURCE: "Public Health Action Plan to Combat Antimicrobial Resistance," Interagency Task Force on Antimicrobial Resistance, January 2000.