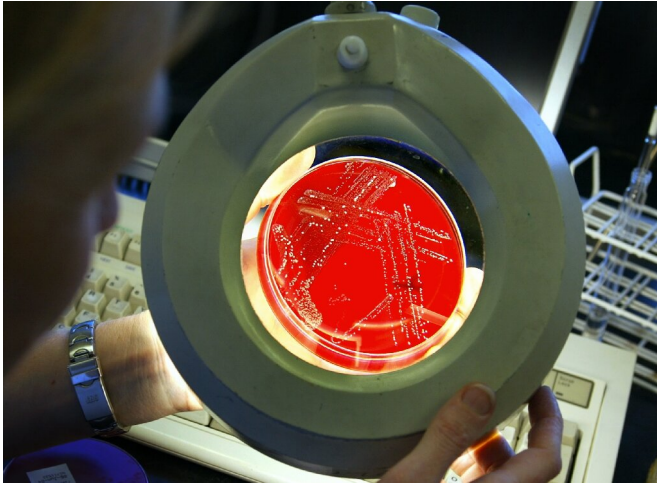


Use COVID-19 lessons to battle deadly superbugs: WHO

15 April 2021, by Nina Larson



Antibiotic resistance happens when bugs become immune to existing drugs, like antibiotics, and make minor injuries and common infections potentially deadly.

Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic should be used to fight the spread of drug-resistant bacteria, which kill tens of thousands of people each year, the World Health Organization said Thursday.

The UN health agency warned that the world was running out of options for fighting antimicrobial resistance (AMR), with few new effective antibiotics in the pipeline.

But it said the coronavirus crisis, which had dramatically deepened global understanding of the health and economic implications of an uncontrolled pandemic, could spur progress.

COVID-19 has taught us "how fast communicable diseases can spread", Henry Skinner, head of the AMR Action Fund, told reporters at a press conference.

"We need to have the right drugs available so we

are always able to treat these infections and prevent their becoming a pandemic."

The worldwide push to rein in the pandemic has proven that rapid progress can be made when there is enough political will, the WHO said.

"Opportunities emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic must be seized to bring to the forefront the needs for sustainable investments in (research and development) of new and effective antibiotics," Haileyesus Getahun, who heads the WHO's AMR division, warned in a statement.

Pool funding

He said, there should be a global mechanism to pool funding to fight the scourge of antimicrobial resistance, along the same lines as the mechanisms created to fund the development of COVID-19 vaccines.

Antibiotic resistance happens when bugs become immune to existing drugs, like antibiotics, antivirals or antifungals, rendering minor injuries and common infections potentially deadly.

Resistance has grown in recent years due to overuse of such drugs in humans and also in farm animals.

Discovered in the 1920s, antibiotics have saved tens of millions of lives by defeating bacterial diseases such as pneumonia, tuberculosis and meningitis.

But over the decades, bacteria have learned to fight back, building resistance to the same drugs that once reliably vanquished them—turning into so-called "superbugs".

Drug-resistant bacteria are estimated to kill more than 33,000 people in Europe each year, and 35,000 in the United States.

Peter Beyer, head of WHO's AMR global coordination and partnership unit, said that while no data is available for other regions, such infections are believed to be an even bigger problem in middle- and lower-income countries.

"In all countries where infection prevention and control is less developed, in hospitals you have a higher mortality, and you have also a higher resistance," he told reporters.

'Insufficient'

To counter bacteria's ability to become resistant to known drugs, a steady stream of new antibiotics is needed, but for pharmaceutical companies, developing competitive new products in this field is complicated, costly, and not seen as very profitable.

Almost all new antibiotics that have been brought to market in recent decades are variations of antibiotic drugs discovered before the 1980s, the WHO pointed out.

Since 2017, the UN agency has published an annual report on what antibacterials are in the pipeline, evaluating their potential for stemming the crisis.

In the report published Thursday, it concluded that none of the 43 new antibiotics currently being developed sufficiently address the problem of drug resistance in the world's most dangerous bacteria.

It also pointed out that a full 82 percent of recently approved antibiotics were derivatives of existing antibiotic classes with well-established drug-resistance, adding that "rapid emergence of drug-resistance to these new agents is expected."

The report highlighted the urgent need to develop new antibacterial treatments, saying those currently in the pipeline were "insufficient" to tackle the challenge.

"While there are some innovative products in the pipeline, it is likely that only a fraction of these will ever come to market due to the high failure rates in the drug development process," the report warned.

Faced with a dire lack of effective antibiotics, this year's report for the first time also listed an overview of "non-traditional antibacterial medicines" that could help fill the gap.

It highlighted 27 such drugs in the pipeline, including monoclonal antibodies like the treatments being used for COVID-19.

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