Resolution on the public health threat of antimicrobial resistance

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Following the debate which was held on 26 October 2011 and following oral questions O-000214/2011 and O-000215/2011 to the Commission on the public health threat of antimicrobial resistance, the European Parliament adopted a resolution tabled by the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety on the same subject.

It notes with concern that antimicrobial resistance is an ever increasing threat to public health in Europe and worldwide, resulting in longer, more complicated treatments, a diminution of quality of life, a greater risk of deaths (25 000 patients die each year in the EU from an infection caused by resistant micro-organisms), extra healthcare costs and productivity losses of at least EUR 1.5 billion per year. Parliament calls for a further intensification of the fight against resistance to antimicrobial agents in human medicines, focusing on, in the following order of priority: (i) the prudent use of antimicrobial agents both for humans and for animals, ensuring that they are only used when effectively needed for actual treatment of disease, with the correct dosage, dose intervals and duration; (ii) the monitoring and surveillance of antimicrobial resistance; (iii) the need for research into, and the development of, new antimicrobial agents and alternatives, and (iv) links with measures to combat resistance to antimicrobial agents in veterinary medicines, animal feeding stuffs and crop-growing.

Members call on the Commission to propose without delay a legislative framework for action against antimicrobial resistance, by promoting ‘responsible use’ initiatives and supporting dissemination of, and information about, such initiatives.

The prudent use of antimicrobial agents: Members reconfirm that urgent action is necessary to avoid, or even reverse, further increases in resistant micro-organisms by reducing unnecessary and inappropriate use of antimicrobial agents. They recognise that many misconceptions exist about antibiotics and their effects, and that according to a survey commissioned by the Commission in 2010, 53% of Europeans still believe that antibiotics kill viruses and 47% believe that they are effective against colds and flu. Parliament calls on the Commission to:

- come forward with proposals to significantly reduce the use of antibiotics and to identify and define general principles and best practices on the prudent use of antimicrobial agents, further elaborating on the Council Recommendation 2002/77/EC on the prudent use of antimicrobial agents in human medicine, and to ensure that these principles and methods are properly implemented in the EU;
- study the issue of inappropriate use and sales of antimicrobial agents with or without prescription throughout the chain – from the doctor and the pharmacist to the patient – in terms of the behaviour of all actors involved, and to implement a comprehensive long-term strategy on the awareness of all these actors;
- bearing in mind that good hygiene can help reduce the need for antibiotics, to promote good hand washing and hand drying - especially in hospitals - in order to prevent the spread of infections and reduce the need for antibiotics.

Members welcome therefore the annual European Antibiotic Awareness Day on 18 November which aims to raise awareness of the public health threat of antimicrobial resistance and call for more responsible use of antibiotics by multiple actions in Member States.

The monitoring and surveillance of antimicrobial resistance: Members stress the need to gather reliable and comparable data on the susceptibility of pathogens to antimicrobial agents and the infections caused by them. They welcome therefore the work begun by the European Antimicrobial Resistance Surveillance System (EARSS) and European Surveillance of Veterinary Antimicrobial Consumption (ESVAC), and now continued by ECDC, on the gathering of high quality, comparable, EU-wide data on antimicrobial resistance, while recognising that there are still many difficulties with respect to data access and the quality of data in some countries. Parliament calls on the Commission, the ECDC and other relevant EU agencies to work together without delay to develop a harmonised and integrated monitoring system for antimicrobial resistance and antimicrobial use in Europe, including an early warning response for new resistance mechanisms and strains.

The need for research into, and the development of, new antimicrobial agents and alternatives: recognising that the growing gap between the frequency of infections caused by resistant micro-organisms and the decline in research into, and development of, new antimicrobial agents is now threatening to take the public health sector back to the pre-antibiotic era, Parliament reiterates the need for more research on new antimicrobials and possible alternatives under the EU's Research Framework Programmes, and encourages collaborative research at EU level which can lead to efficiency gains. It considers the decline in research and development to be the result of a market failure and calls on the Commission to make proposals, via regulatory pathways and other types of measures, to create or improve incentives for the pharmaceutical industry to intensify investment in research into, and development of, new antimicrobial agents and possible alternatives.

Holistic approach: Parliament calls on the Commission to ensure that measures on antimicrobial resistance and public health are part of a holistic approach to antimicrobial resistance, recognising the links with measures to combat resistance to antimicrobial agents in veterinary medicines, animal feeding stuffs and crop-growing, specifically as regards the risk of cross-transmission. In this respect, it makes a series of recommendations, calling on the Commission to:

- address the lack of information on EU-wide antibiotic use in veterinary medicines by gathering high quality, comparable, species-specific data for each Member State;
- make legislative proposals to phase out the prophylactic use of antibiotics in livestock farming;
- ensure the establishment of good practices for animal husbandry which minimise the risk of antimicrobial resistance, emphasising that these practices should in particular apply to young animals brought together from different breeders thus increasing the risk of communicable diseases;
- promote further research into the impact of long-term exposure to pharmaceutical residues through water and soil, noting that that when pharmaceutical residues are not disposed of properly, they end up in our waterways thus increasing unintentional exposure to a variety of substances linked to antibiotic resistance.
- Members call for a separation between the active ingredients and effect mechanisms used in human medicine and veterinary medicine, to the extent possible, to reduce the risk of resistance against antibiotics being transferred from livestock to humans, but point out that this must not result in the imposition of restrictions on existing treatment options that are effective.

International cooperation: the Commission is asked to (i) strengthen its close operation with the World Health Organisation (WHO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and other relevant parties and organisations at international level in order to deal more effectively at a global level with antimicrobial resistance; and (ii) ensure that sufficient financial and human resources are available to implement the relevant strategies.