Drug resistant bacteria are spreading across the world, threatening to turn previously treatable diseases into deadly killers. A big part of the problem is that the production and much of the use of antibiotics is in the hands of large corporations that seek profit over the wellbeing of people.

We could soon be facing an “antibiotic apocalypse” as life-saving drugs are becoming ineffective, warned England’s Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies earlier this year. Drug resistant bacteria are spreading across the world, threatening to turn previously treatable diseases into deadly killers. Unless we take urgent action, drug-resistant infections are expected to kill 10 million people a year by 2050, more people than die from cancer.

A big part of the problem is that the production and much of the use of antibiotics is in the hands of large corporations that seek profit over the wellbeing of people. No new type of antibiotic has been developed in over 30 years, as it is not profitable enough for companies. And much of our antibiotic use comes from the routine use of antibiotics in groups of livestock, such as pigs and poultry, where no disease has even been diagnosed. This might push up corporate profit margins, but also increases the risk of bacteria developing resistance.

The antibiotic apocalypse

The discovery of antibiotics has revolutionised medicine and is central to the treatment and prevention of many diseases. But according to the World Health Organisation, we’re facing a “post-antibiotic era” as bacteria develop resistance to antibiotics. At least 700,000 people already die from antibiotic-resistant infections every year and if we don’t take action, that number will rise to 10 million by 2050. Previously curable diseases could once again become deadly killers as drugs become ineffective. And life-saving treatments such as caesarean sections, joint replacements and chemotherapy could become too dangerous to perform without effective antibiotics to prevent deadly infections.

Drug-resistant bacteria are developing into a global crisis and could kill more than 300 million people over the next 35 years. People in poorer countries already have less access to life-saving antibiotics, but they will also be the first and hardest hit as cheaper forms of antibiotics become ineffective. Countries with high levels of diseases like TB, which is already developing antibiotic resistance, will be especially hard hit. Of the estimated 10 million deaths a year from drug resistant bacteria by 2050, almost 9 million would be in Asia and Africa, so drug resistant bacteria will exacerbate already extreme global inequality.

“On current trends, a common disease like gonorrhea may become untreatable. Doctors facing patients will have to say, ‘I’m sorry – there’s nothing I can do for you.’”

Margaret Chan, World Health Organization director general
**What causes antibiotic resistance?**

Bacteria are constantly evolving and due to rising levels of antibiotic use, more and more bacteria are developing resistance to drugs. Human use of antibiotics is still the main cause of drug resistance, but there’s an increasing scientific consensus that overuse of antibiotics in agriculture is a significant part of the problem. In the UK, 45% of antibiotics are used for livestock such as pigs and poultry. It is mostly fed to healthy animals in low doses over long periods of time because the industrial conditions they’re kept in would otherwise make them ill. But this creates the perfect environment for bacteria to develop resistance to those antibiotics. Research has shown that antibiotic resistance in diseases like Salmonella and E. coli is directly linked to overuse of antibiotics in livestock.

Drug resistant bacteria have been found in supermarkets across the UK. A recent study found resistant E.coli in one out of four chicken samples from seven leading supermarket chains in the UK: Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons, Waitrose, Co-op and Aldi. This shows how widespread the problem of resistant bacteria is. People working directly with livestock or living close to farms that use large amounts of antibiotics are more likely to get infected with drug-resistant bacteria but resistant bacteria from livestock can spread to people on a much wider scale through air, water, soil and our food.

Use of antibiotics in livestock rearing is prevalent in large-scale industrial livestock rearing which accounts for 70% of all livestock production globally and more than twice the amount of antibiotics are given to livestock than humans. In many countries including the USA, antibiotics are used to make livestock grow faster. Even though this practise has been banned in the EU, farm antibiotic overuse continues across Europe.

**The broken economic system**

At the heart of the problem is a broken economic system that places corporate short-term profits before our health. Sustained doses of antibiotics allow farms to keep livestock in factory-like conditions and feed them lower quality fodder in order to make higher profits and more money for their shareholders.

The pharmaceutical industry is a big part of the problem. No new type of antibiotic has been developed since the 1980s because it is not profitable for pharmaceutical companies to do so as the use of new antibiotics would have to be very restricted and reserved for cases where no other antibiotics work. When our current last resort antibiotics become ineffective because of drug resistant bacteria, we will be left without effective treatments for some infections. That means it is vital that we protect the antibiotics we have from bacterial resistance.

> “There is a broken market model for making new antibiotics, so it’s an empty pipeline, so as they become resistant, these bugs, which they would naturally but we’re breeding them in because of the way antibiotics are used, there will not be new antibiotics to come.”

Professor Dame Sally Davies, chief medical officer for England

Big agribusinesses and pharmaceutical companies are lobbying hard to avoid new regulation to limit use of antibiotics in livestock so they can continue to sell large amounts of drugs and keep producing livestock under unhealthy but cheap conditions. Just as is the case on climate change, the corporations causing the problem are denying scientific evidence to safeguard their own short-term profits.
Pharmaceutical and agricultural companies fund almost 80% of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD), the UK government agency responsible for regulation of antibiotic use in agriculture. This means that the institution responsible for deciding how to regulate the use of antibiotics in livestock in the UK is also financially dependent on granting licenses for antibiotic use. The VMD business plan states that: ‘We will continue to consult our customers and interest groups at the earliest stage during development of policy and strategy and invite them to put forward proposals for the development of effective regulatory mechanisms’, showing the close relationship between the VMD and the very industry it is regulating.

What can we do to stop the antibiotic apocalypse?

We need to change the way our medicine and food is controlled and produced to combat antibiotic resistance. As long as company profits are prioritised over our health, we cannot expect to see lasting solutions to problems like antibiotic resistance. We need food production that focuses on feeding people healthy food rather than pleasing shareholders. Across the world, hundreds of millions of small-scale farmers are organising to create a people-centred food system under the banner of food sovereignty: the idea that control of our food should be in the hands of producers and consumers rather than big businesses.

There are very concrete steps that can be taken to limit the spread of antibiotic resistance. British pig farmers use 5 times more antibiotics than farmers in the Netherlands and Denmark and 25 times more than in Sweden. In both places, farmers themselves have taken a big part in cutting antibiotic use, and have shown that cutting antibiotics does not necessarily mean losing market share.

Antibiotic resistance has finally been put on the global agenda and governments are slowly realising that we need to change the way antibiotics are used. This year the United Nations passed a declaration, signed by 193 countries, to curb use of antibiotics in humans and livestock. The EU is currently negotiating regulations to curb farm-use of antibiotics and it is vital that we make sure the regulations are strong enough to stop the spread of resistant bacteria and that the UK keeps this legislation after leaving the EU.

- We need a ban on routine mass medication of groups of livestock where no disease has been detected. Use of antibiotics in livestock should only be in case of diagnosed diseases. About 90% of antibiotics given to livestock is given as mass medication to groups of pigs and poultry; this should be reserved for outbreaks of diseases.
- We need to urgently curb farm use of antibiotics that are critically important to human health. These antibiotics should only be used as a last resort and only in individual animals.
- We need animal welfare to be improved as part of the strategy to curb antibiotic use. The current large-scale industrial livestock farming keep animals under such poor conditions that they need large amounts of antibiotics to stay healthy.
- We need to make sure regulations are made and enforced independently from the corporations benefiting from high antibiotic use. To ensure that human health is prioritised over corporate profits, we need strong safeguards of regulatory bodies to protect them from corporate conflicts of interest.

To find out how you can help tackle corporate power and become part of a movement for real change visit globaljustice.org.uk or call 020 7820 4900.

Global Justice Now campaigns for a world where resources are controlled by the many, not the few. With thousands of members around the UK, we work in solidarity with global social movements to fight inequality and injustice.

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