

Managing Antimicrobial Resistance Through Behavior Change, March 2021

Consumer behaviour and antibiotic resistance

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Background

The food we consume contributes greatly to antibiotic resistance. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends an overall reduction in the use of antibiotics in food production, to preserve the effectiveness of these medications in human medicine. However, who is responsible for making the appropriate changes? The WHO's primary audience is policymakers and regulatory officials overseeing food production. Nonetheless, the WHO underlines the important role that consumers can play. Through their choices, consumers can act as a driving force in the market and have a strong influence on how foods are produced¹.

While many people may agree in principle with more sustainable consumer behaviour, barriers of different kinds hinder them from engaging in such behaviour. For example, eating behaviour is a transdisciplinary concept, involving the complexities that food and meals entail for various groups and individuals in diverse contexts, and can be viewed from the perspectives of both natural and social sciences. Major efforts to try to change consumer behaviour have been made in relation to sustainability, but it seems that consumers need to be approached from multiple different directions. Punishments, rewards and regulations are the different methods that have typically been used to put pressure on consumers. A relatively underexplored direction involves the possibility of socially encouraging consumers to display correct antibiotic behaviours, which means putting social pressure on them, but also empowering them and making them feel responsible in acting sustainably in their food choices.

Approach

The objective of the workshop was to explore ways of promoting – through a multi-stakeholder approach – more sustainable purchasing behaviour among consumers. The workshop was attended by 33 participants from different

parts of the globe, mainly from European and African countries, but also from the U.S., Thailand and Australia. Participants had diverse backgrounds and represented different interests, including behavioural research, pharmaceutical companies, food and drug authorities, retailers, patient safety organisations, ethics, etc.

The workshop structure encompassed two main parts. First, three invited speakers gave talks, each followed by time for questions and answers. Second, thematic discussions were held in breakout groups.

The talks were delivered by Dr Elin Nilsson from Umeå University, 'Consumer behaviour in the store – difficulty of choosing the "right" thing'; Prof. Erik Angner from Stockholm University, 'Norms and behaviour'; and Dr Alberto Giubilini from the University of Oxford, 'Taxing meat: taking responsibility for one's contribution to antibiotic resistance'.

After a short break, participants discussed the following themes in five groups: *Retailer's role* (groups 1–2), *Consumer behaviour* (groups 3–4), and *Consumer responsibility* (group 5). The authors of the present report facilitated the group discussions, one in each group. Group themes were designed by the organisers on the basis of participants' early feedback ahead of the workshop.

In the *Retailer's role* groups, the discussion was prompted by (but not limited to) the following questions: What is/should be the role of retailers in curbing antibiotic resistance? What could retailers do to nudge consumer behaviour towards antibiotic-smart purchases in-store/out-of-store? Antibiotics and food labels: dos and don'ts?

In the *Consumer behaviour* groups, the discussion was prompted by (but not limited to) the following questions: How can we promote sustainable consumption behaviour in relation to antibiotic resistance? Campaigns? Taxation? How can we overcome the mental barriers of consumers? Are we asking the right questions?

¹WHO (2017). WHO guidelines on use of medically important antimicrobials in food-producing animals.

In the *Consumer responsibility* group, the discussion was prompted by (but not limited to) the following questions: Do consumers have any role to play? How should consumers conceive their responsibility for antibiotic resistance? Is there a responsibility to buy groceries that contribute as little as possible to antibiotic resistance?

Participants were assigned to the thematic groups based on their preferences.

Recommendations

Consumers have a responsibility for the food they buy and consume. Such responsibility varies and depends on individual and local contexts. The continuous blame game among consumers, producers, retailers and authorities is not conducive to finding solutions, but highlights the interconnection and interdependence of the parties involved. The multiple ways to promote sustainable consumption behaviour regarding antibiotic resistance, such as campaigning, taxation, increasing awareness of the problem, etc., are not mutually exclusive and need to be tailored to local realities. Local actions need to be supported by a global commitment in areas such as conflict prevention, development financing and the climate crisis. Local actions through partnerships between the private sector and civil society, media, academia and others are required to make a difference in people's lives. Retailers could help consumers in their decision-making in several ways. They could promote antibiotic-smart goods or provide guidance, e.g., by having clearer information on products or simpler, more comprehensive labels, or by tailoring offerings in online shopping based on stated preferences (for example healthier or more animal-friendly), thereby decreasing stress levels in the consumer's decision-making process.

There is a need for:

- Applying available knowledge to promote action at the local and regional levels on issues related to antibiotic resistance. Highlighting how organisations can set goals in relation to antibiotic resistance and reduction strategies for continuous work.

- Significant and coordinated policy efforts to manage both consumer behavioural changes and to incentivise and manage structural change in the agri-food supply chain.
- Development and implementation of policies that include the entire chain of producers and a third-party reviewer, in order to create local regulations and follow-ups. This should include a one health approach to antibiotic resistance containment.
- Compilation and active dissemination of knowledge regarding the influence of food choices on antibiotic resistance to the general public (consumers), companies and social services.
- Clear and coherent labelling, possibly the creation of a single comprehensive 'sustainability' label encompassing information on several different local and global issues.
- Customisation of solutions in the local context, based on the priorities of the consumers, e.g., through subsidies on specific products. This can promote sustainable consumption behaviour.
- An emphasis on the important role that consumers have in their own lives, in their communities and globally.

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