

WHO calls for urgent action to prevent return to pre antibiotic era

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"Immediate action is needed to stop the world from heading towards pre-antibiotic era in which all achievements made in prevention and control of communicable diseases will be reversed. Common infections and minor injuries which have been treatable for decades may once again kill millions. Resistance to antibiotics will make complex surgeries and management of several chronic illnesses like cancer, extremely difficult," Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, regional director of WHO South-East Asia Region, said at a regional meeting in Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste.

Already, without effective antimicrobial medicines, a number of common infections such as hospital acquired ventilator associated pneumonias, urinary tract infections; diarrhea, gonorrhoea, tuberculosis, malaria etc. are becoming harder to treat. The problem is compounding, and unless we act now, the consequences might be irreversible, Dr Khetrpal Singh said.

A recent forecast of the potential human and economic cost estimates 10 million deaths per year globally and 2 to 3.5 percent less global gross domestic product by 2050 if antimicrobial resistance goes unchecked. Reduced productivity from persisting illness, and its cost of treatment, add to the economic loss.

The Regional Director was addressing health ministers and senior health ministry officials from the 11 Member countries of WHO South-East Asia Region, at the Sixty-eighth meeting of the Regional Committee which meets annually to discuss health priorities and health agenda for the Region.

Dr Khetrpal Singh said comprehensive and integrated national action plans are needed to respond to antimicrobial resistance. Countries need to strengthen monitoring of the extent and cause of antibiotic resistance, improve infection control in hospitals and regulate and promote appropriate use of medicines.

Increased awareness needs to be created among the general public as well as health workers and pharmacists on taking/selling only prescribed medicines and completing its full course.

WHO South-East Asia regional strategy, the Jaipur Declaration on Antimicrobial Resistance, 2011 and the recent Global Action Plan need to be implemented in totality, keeping in mind national priorities and context, to prevent and contain antimicrobial resistance.

The current global antibiotic resistance has resulted from injudicious rampant use of antibiotics by prescribers, patients not completing full treatment courses, over-use of antibiotics in livestock and fish farming, poor control of infections in health care settings and poor hygiene. There are not many new antibiotics in the pipeline that can replace the resistant and ineffective ones.

"Antibiotics are a precious resource. They have saved millions of lives by treating serious infections. Everyone has a role to play in preserving their effectiveness, together we can stop this potential threat," Dr Khetrpal Singh stated.