The fight against Antimicrobial Resistance supports efforts towards Better Labs for Better Health

Why pay attention to antimicrobial resistance (AMR)?
Antimicrobial agents like antibiotics are essential to treat some human and animal diseases. Microbes, such as bacteria, can develop resistance to antimicrobials meaning that a drug such as an antibiotic is no longer effective in treating the infection. The development of resistance is caused by the incorrect use of these drugs, for example, using antibiotics (which help to treat bacteria) for viral infections like flu, or as a growth promoter in agriculture.

Because of this the world is running out of effective antibiotics to treat infectious diseases, and unless appropriate action is taken, decades of progress in health and medicine risk being undone.

In May 2015, the World Health Assembly (WHA) endorsed a global action plan on AMR and urged all Member States to develop national action plans. WHA72 (May 2019) called for an accelerated implementation.

Why pay attention to Better Labs for Better Health?
Better Labs for Better Health was conceived in 2012 as an intersectoral approach to support Member States in eastern Europe and central Asia to improve the quality and timeliness of their public health laboratory services. Better Labs focuses on four main areas:
1. develop national laboratory policies and strategic plans;
2. improve national training programmes and implement laboratory quality management systems;
3. establish laboratory networks for emergency preparedness and response; and
4. advocacy, partnership and leadership.

In addition, a collaborative approach for mentoring national and regional laboratories implicated in AMR is a priority for Better Labs.

How can both issues benefit from each other?
Antibiotics should only be used when a patient has been proven to be suffering from a bacterial infection and there are no alternative treatments. In addition, the antibiotics used should be matched as closely as possible to the specific findings. Therefore, reliable diagnostic results are crucial. However, it often takes too long to obtain a result and the quality of the diagnostics is poor. Unfortunately, this often leads to a non-targeted use of antibiotics – seen as safer and cheaper than conducting laboratory tests prior to treatment.

Laboratories with functional quality management systems are crucial to allow reliable diagnostics to guide proper treatment for patients in time, detect the changes in resistance and prevent the spread of AMR. Therefore, strategies for AMR and improving laboratory quality should go hand in hand.

What are WHO/Europe’s priorities regarding AMR and Better Labs for Better Health?

Training and mentoring in general
In some countries, laboratory capacity or quality is not sufficient to test bacteria for AMR.

In response, the Better Labs initiative educates future mentors in laboratory quality management. These mentors then train laboratory personnel in the respective countries. Together, the mentors and laboratory staff develop a common understanding of the laboratory’s gaps and needs and a corresponding activity plan to implement the quality management system.

The mentors also help the laboratories to build up the necessary skills for AMR detection to obtain more reliable data on resistant bacteria. International experts support them in this process. These teams meet regularly with the laboratories to ensure the sustainability and consistency of what they have learned.

Proof-of-Principle projects (PoP)
Proof-of-Principle projects demonstrate that it is very valuable to have rapid and reliable tests for the appropriate treatment of patients and the surveillance of AMR. WHO/Europe conducts PoP projects with Member States on request. PoP projects follow a clear structure in close cooperation with local authorities.

WHO/Europe advises and accompanies the hospitals and local teams during the entire project.
“Thanks to this programme our laboratory services have improved”

Statement of a mentor for regional AMR laboratories in Kyrgyzstan:

“My name is Kyal Ormokoeva, I work in the endocrinology center at the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic. Better Labs for Better Health is one of the guides in our country. Thanks to this programme our laboratory services have improved. Our specialists had the opportunity to learn a lot of different things. For the first time, many of us have learnt about ISO 15189*, which was unknown to us before.”

*an international standard that specifies the quality management system requirements particular to medical laboratories.

The fight against AMR requires everyone’s commitment. Support us by giving this important issue the high priority it deserves, by taking the appropriate decisions and implementing effective measures – and always in line with Better Labs!