

Media release

15 February 2013

Government inaction on antibiotic resistance exposed

Twenty years of government inaction could lead to curable illnesses like tonsillitis again becoming a massive threat to human health, as the rise of anti-microbial resistant bacteria (aka “the superbug”) threatens to take us back to our pre-antibiotic era, a new paper by The Australia Institute reveals.

Culture of Resistance: Australia’s response to the inappropriate use of antimicrobials highlights the danger of anti-microbial resistance (AMR) in Australia, and the alarming lack of action taken by government.

Report author Kerrie Tucker said the World Health Organization, which has been working on global containment of AMR since 1990, has identified the main underlying factors that cause AMR to spread globally, and it appears most of these factors are present in Australia.

“For Australia, a developed country, this is a significant failure not only in terms of protecting public health domestically but also in the global fight against AMR,” said Mrs Tucker.

“Australians are one of the highest users of antibiotics in the world, with roughly 22 million prescriptions being dispensed every year. We sit well above the OECD average and our use is more than double that of Scandinavian countries.”

In 1997, the Australian government set up the Joint Expert Technical Advisory Committee on Antibiotic Resistance (JETACAR) to provide expert advice on the threat posed by antibiotic resistant bacteria to human health from the overuse of antibiotics in medical and agricultural use.

In 1999, JETACAR released a report that made 22 recommendations aimed at reducing AMR by covering both the use of antibiotics in humans and animals.

This report stressed the importance of national surveillance and a coordinated cross-sectoral approach and on-going evaluation of AMR but no overall and ongoing assessment of progress has been made available, or apparently even undertaken.

“Initially there was a strong commitment to implementing the recommendations of the 1999 Report; however this failed through lack of leadership and a lack of effective action or accountability,” said Mrs Tucker.

For media enquiries, please contact:

Serena Rogers 0421 759 262

“Unless there is a careful examination of what actually went wrong post JETACAR, the costs and consequences will not only be felt in the health sector, but will have repercussions on trade and travel, as a result of the cross-border spread of resistant infections.”