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World’s largest gathering on infectious diseases meets following stark warnings on global antibiotic resistance and the spread of polio being declared an international public health emergency

10 May 2014, BARCELONA: More than 10,000 experts from 112 countries will gather today at the world’s largest conference on infectious diseases a week after the World Health Organisation (WHO) gave a stark warning about antibiotic resistance as a major global threat, occurring now in every region of the world.

Scientists, clinicians, health professionals and representatives from industry participating at the annual European Congress of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ECCMID) taking place 10-13 May in Barcelona, acknowledge that they are facing a number of increasing challenges and emerging new threats in infectious diseases, not least development of antibiotic resistance at a pace that means we could soon face a “post-antibiotic era” where people would die from simple infections that have been treatable for decades. One family of so called “last resort” drugs – carbapenems - used to treat people with life-threatening infections, are reportedly no longer working in more than half of people being treated in some countries. There have been no new class of antibiotics since 1987 and few antibiotics in the development pipeline.

The topic is one that will feature throughout the four-day Congress which is organised by the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESCMID). “A renewed focused on, and support for, the development of new antibiotics is critical, as well as the appropriate use of the ones that still work”, said Professor Gunnar Kahlmeter, outgoing ESCMID President. “This should be in addition to education in antimicrobial resistance for the medical community, general public education, screening, restrictions on inappropriate use of antibiotics in agriculture, and a range of surveillance systems that collect and share data on resistance and drug susceptibility. We have no time to lose as resistance is happening right now in every region and inaction would be devastating.”

Also a topic of concern at ECCMID will be WHO’s recent declaration that the spread of polio is an international public health emergency (5th May) following outbreaks in Asia, Africa and the Middle East which are seen as an “extraordinary event” that requires coordinated international response. It is only the second time in WHO’s history it has made such a declaration (the first being during the swine flu pandemic of 2009). Polio, which mainly affects children under five years old, is a virus transmitted through contaminated food and water which can cause paralysis in one in every 200 infections. Whilst it is endemic in only three countries – Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria – attacks on vaccination campaigns for example in Pakistan have allowed the virus to spread across borders. “Whilst there is one person anywhere in the world infected with the polio virus there remains the risk of an epidemic, especially given vaccination gaps, and we risk un-doing the polio containment efforts of the past 30 years,” said Professor Susanna Esposito who leads ESCMID’s Vaccine Study Group.

Other news in the field of vaccines that will feature at ECCMID includes the approval and introduction in Europe of a new meningitis B vaccine which protects children against one of the most common and deadly forms of meningitis. This vaccine is thought to provide some
73% protection against meningitis B, a bacterial infection that is fatal in one in 10 cases and leaves many suffering life changing disabilities. “Approval of new vaccines are always very welcome as they represent the most effective and efficient strategies to prevent infectious diseases”, said Professor Esposito.

There has been a renewed focus recently on vector-borne diseases such as dengue fever, Chikungunya fever and Lyme’s disease which, despite being found mainly in the tropics and subtropics, are being increasingly observed more often in temperate climates with currently an estimated 77,000 cases annually in Europe. The result of the transmission of infectious organisms via bites from mosquitoes, ticks, fleas or sandfly, vector-borne diseases account for 17% of the estimated global burden of all infectious diseases with an increasing number of outbreaks of dengue and Chikungunya in the European region reported in the last five years. There will be some sessions on the issue during ECCMID. “The recent focus internationally on vector-borne diseases underlines the need for concerted action to improve prevention, surveillance and control. With summer fast approaching and people spending more time outdoors in warmer weather, it is also important for everyone to take precautions against being bitten, as well as governments being prepared to properly respond to outbreaks,” said Professor Giuseppe Cornaglia, ESCMID Past President.

A late breaker topic added to the Congress is Ebola following the recent outbreak in West Africa which has been described by WHO as "one of the most challenging Ebola outbreaks we have ever dealt with". With a reported 155 deaths in Guinea by early May 2014, the outbreak is unusual because the disease is typically found in central or eastern Africa and this is the first known outbreak in Guinea. Spread by close contact, there is still no cure for the disease which is described as one of the world’s most virulent diseases and carries a fatality rate of up to 90%. Another topic that will be discussed is the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV), a variant of the respiratory virus that can cause the common cold. A recent worrying increase in new cases and deaths have been reported by officials, with the number of known cases more than 300 in Saudi Arabia (including 102 deaths) and 400 cases globally. Whilst the majority have occurred on the Arabian Peninsula, there have been deaths from infection elsewhere, including Europe, and the first case in the USA was confirmed this month in a traveller to the country. First detected in a patient in September 2012, it is still unclear exactly how transmission occurs.

“The emergence and on-going spread of infections and growing concern on antibiotic resistance reinforces the need for intensified and collective action in and between countries and continents”, said Professor Murat Akova, incoming ESCMID President. “As we meet over the next four days with colleagues from every part of the world we will aim to share experience, expertise and innovative research as collaboration is key”.

Press registration to attend the congress is free and for information or interviews contact: Claire Hoffman, claire.hoffman@bartley-robbs.co.uk Tel: +44 7977 440353 or Cathy Bartley, cathy.bartley@bartley-robbs.co.uk Tel: +44 +44 07958 561 671.

Congress website: www.eccmid.org

ESCMID is a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of infectious diseases in Europe and beyond. The Society promotes and supports research, education and training and shares good medical practice in the infection disciplines to build capacity throughout Europe www.escmid.org