

The Times

Date: 3 December 2016

Circulation: 437,352

THE TIMES
SATURDAY
Weekend newspaper of the year
December 3 2016 | thetimes.co.uk | No 72084
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News

Toughen up to save us from superbugs

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Patients must stop turning to the GP when they have a bug and rediscover old-fashioned "resilience", the chief medical officer has said.

Professor Dame Sally Davies said the kind of stoicism that existed before the NHS was now needed to fight deadly superbugs. She urged the sick to tough out even infections that confine them to bed for several days.

"Demanding" patients had become the biggest obstacle to ridding overuse of antibiotics in routine GP consultations, she said.

Such overuse is allowing common infections to evolve resistance to the drugs, leaving patients increasingly defenceless. Dame Sally has been vocal in warning that antibiotic resistance threatens the foundation of modern medicine. Procedures from chemotherapy to hip replacements rely on being able to fight infections.

"I still think we have a risk of apocalypse," she told The Times at the World Innovation Summit for Health in Doha, where she was urging representatives of more than 100 countries to reduce the use of antibiotics and step up efforts to find new drugs.

She warned of "backsliding" among some doctors who were not washing their hands properly and urged the medical profession not to become complacent. However, with recent figures suggesting that antibiotic prescribing

by GPs has started to fall, Dame Sally said the main difficulty now was "probably more how we change the public".

She added: "We need patients and the public to understand that most of the time they don't need antibiotics."

Children could often be given prescriptions that would only be fulfilled if infections had not cleared up after a few days, she also suggested.

"I've just had a stinking cold, been to bed for three days and lost my voice. Everyone kept saying 'Are you taking antibiotics?' And I say 'No, I haven't even been to the GP. Why would I go? I've got a virus,'" she said.

"We used to have resilience as a nation before we had an NHS and through the early years. We have to rediscover that resilience."

Helen Stokes-Lampard, chairwoman of the Royal College of GPs, backed her stance, saying: "As a society we need to get out of the mindset that there is a miracle cure for every ailment – and that that cure is antibiotics. There isn't, and it's not."

Superbugs are estimated to kill 200,000 people around the world each year, including about 5,000 in Britain. Without action, the death toll is predicted to climb steeply.

Addressing the conference, Dame Sally warned: "If we do not take action we risk moving back to the pre-antibiotic era when people cannot be treated for cuts and grazes.... We have to understand that none of us are safe from this."



Face of a rebel The Apache leader Geronimo, photographed by Edward Sheriff Curtis for his seminal 1907 work The North American Indian. Thirteen of the 20 volumes, and photographic plates, are for sale at Dorewatts & Bloomsbury

Gut feeling gives clue to Parkinson's

Oliver Moody Science Correspondent

Parkinson's disease may come about when people have the wrong sort of bacteria proliferating in their intestines, according to a study of mice.

The condition involves a loss of nerve cells leaving the brain short of a signalling chemical, leading to tremors, muscular stiffness and cognitive problems. It affects about 120,000 people in Britain, mostly over the age of 50.

Researchers have long suspected that it was linked to the health of the gut but have struggled to show how. Scientists at the California Institute of Technology have found for the first time that giving genetically modified mice the bacteria from Parkinson's patients made them fall ill with similar symptoms, although mice cannot develop Parkinson's.

The study, which is published in the journal Cell, does not indicate which bacteria might be to blame but suggests that the culprit might be short-chain fatty acids that trigger an immune over-reaction via a long nerve that runs between the brain and the gut. This means that Parkinson's could in theory be treated or prevented by managing a patient's microbial health.

Arthur Rosch, of Parkinson's UK, said that the work "opens an exciting new avenue of study on the gut-brain connection of Parkinson's". He hopes this will trigger more research that will ultimately revolutionise treatment.