

OPINION | TO CONTAIN ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE, START WITH SELF-CARE AND PREVENTION

Non-prescription antimicrobials (NPAs) are essential frontline tools that reduce infection, save resources, and protect antibiotic efficacy for future generations.

By **Greg Perry** // World AMR Awareness Week 18-24 November 2025

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) refers to the process when bacteria, viruses, fungi, or parasites change over time and no longer respond to medicines that previously killed them or stopped their proliferation. A threat to public health, in 2021 alone, AMR was associated with 4.71 million global deaths, according to a 2024 Lancet study.¹ Without urgent action, it could cause 8.22 million deaths annually² as well as drain \$100 trillion from the world economy³ by 2050.

To win the fight against AMR, we must employ a 360 degrees approach to the problem and build on available tools.

One such tool is found in non-prescription antimicrobials (NPAs).

NPAs are antimicrobial products – such as soaps, disinfectants, creams and gels applied to the skin, sprays, or oral treatments – that are accessible without a doctor's prescription for direct use by individuals in home, community or healthcare settings. Non-prescription antimicrobials treat viral, fungal, bacterial, and parasitic infections, disinfect wounds, prevent infection in minor injuries, and support hygiene by eliminating pathogens on skin and surfaces.⁴ When used at the correct dose and for the right length of time, NPAs help prevent and control infections whilst reducing the need for doctors visits. These are front-line easily applied preventive tools that are accessible directly in pharmacies or in some cases in retail outlets.

¹ Naghavi, M. et al., *Global burden of bacterial antimicrobial resistance 1990–2021: a systematic analysis with forecasts to 2050* (2024). [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01867-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01867-1/fulltext)

² Naghavi, M. et al., *Global burden of bacterial antimicrobial resistance 1990–2021: a systematic analysis with forecasts to 2050* (2024). [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01867-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01867-1/fulltext)

³ World Health Organization, *New WHO report highlights progress, but also remaining gaps, in ensuring a robust pipeline of antibiotic treatments to combat antimicrobial resistance (AMR)* (2023). <https://www.who.int/news/item/15-05-2023-new-who-report-highlights-progress-but-also-remaining-gaps-in-ensuring-a-robust-pipeline-of-antibiotic-treatments-to-combat-antimicrobial-resistance-%28amr%29>

⁴ Global Self-Care Federation, *Brief on the Value of Self-Care in AMR Containment* (Wilton Park, February 2025). <https://www.selfcarefederation.org/resources/gscf-brief-value-self-care-amr-containment-wilton-park-12-14-february-2025>

Step 1: Prevent

WHO's Strategic Priorities to Address Drug-Resistant Infections highlight prevention as a key factor in curbing antimicrobial resistance.⁵ This is where NPAs come into play. For example, simple every day products such as hand soaps (removing dirt and germs by washing with water) or disinfectants (designed to inhibit or kill bacteria) are frontline defenses in breaking the chain of bacterial transmission. Other recent guidance on AMR has prioritized the improvement of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), as the first pillar of Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) of the WHO People-centred approach to addressing AMR in human health.⁶ The recently released WHO zero draft of the updated Global Action Plan against AMR also reinforces the necessity of investing in IPC and WASH, underlining their pivotal role in the fight against AMR.⁷

Spotlight on Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs)

The persistence of resistant pathogens is especially exacerbated in LMICs due to sub-optimal WASH infrastructure and infection prevention measures. Infections caught in hospitals are often very hard to treat because many patients have weaker immune systems and bacterial infections acquired in hospitals do not respond well to medicines. This includes highly resistant bacteria listed as priority pathogens for new antibiotic development by the WHO. These include the twelve bacteria families posing the greatest risks for human health⁸ and especially affect individuals with chronic illnesses like diabetes, cancer, lung, heart, and kidney diseases.⁹ This underscores the urgent need for scaled infection prevention interventions supported by broader access to safe non-prescription antimicrobials such as antiseptics and hand soaps.

To break the chain of bacterial transmission, it is key to embed self-care practices centred on effective hygiene, such as hand-washing and sanitation, into everyday life. When correctly used, various everyday hygiene products can reduce infection

⁵ World Health Organization, *Monitoring the Implementation of the WHO Strategic and Operational Priorities to Address Drug-Resistant Bacterial Infections (2025-2035)* (2025).
[https://www.who.int/teams/surveillance-prevention-control-AMR/national-action-plan-monitoring-evaluation/monitoring-the-implementation-of-the-who-strategic-and-operational-priorities-to-address-drug-resistant-bacterial-infections-\(2025-2035\)](https://www.who.int/teams/surveillance-prevention-control-AMR/national-action-plan-monitoring-evaluation/monitoring-the-implementation-of-the-who-strategic-and-operational-priorities-to-address-drug-resistant-bacterial-infections-(2025-2035))

⁶ WHO, *People-centered approach to addressing antimicrobial resistance in human health: WHO core package of interventions to support national action plans* (2023).
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240082496>

⁷ WHO, *Global Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance: Accelerating the Global Response, Second Edition 2026-2035* (2025) https://www.qjsamr.org/docs/librariesprovider25/mspp-page/zero-draft-updated-gap-amr.pdf?sfvrsn=702e3876_3

⁸ WHO, *WHO bacterial priority pathogens list, 2024: Bacterial pathogens of public health importance to guide research, development and strategies to prevent and control antimicrobial resistance* (2024).
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240093461>

⁹ Raspail Carrel Founou, Luria Leslie Founou, Sabiha Yusuf Essack, *Clinical and economic impact of antibiotic resistance in developing countries: A systematic review and meta-analysis* (2017).
https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=fr&user=eejmC2kAAAAJ&citation_for_view=eejmC2kAAAAJ:KbBQZpvPDL4C

frequency and risk, and, consequently, lower the demand for antibiotics across the board. This is essential to preserve antibiotic efficacy, so that individuals can continue to benefit from their effectiveness when they need it most. This approach also aligns with WHO's People-Centered Core Package of Interventions, which underscores the importance of community-level infection prevention and control actions.¹⁰

Step 2: Empower

The second priority of the WHO Strategic Priorities to Address Drug-Resistant Infections emphasizes timely and equitable access to accurate diagnosis and quality treatment.¹¹ Community healthcare workers and pharmacists play an instrumental part in this ecosystem. They are trusted frontline healthcare workers with a strong knowledge of the community served.¹² ¹³ Trained in antibiotic management, community workers and pharmacists¹⁴ can promote proper hygiene practices and educate communities and individuals on the correct use of a whole range of non-prescription antimicrobials.¹⁵ ¹⁶ Their close involvement helps catch problems early and encourages individuals to take better care of themselves, which can help reduce the overall use of antibiotics. To accompany their critical role, governments can roll out public education campaigns and improve self-care literacy via publicly accessible information outlets and promotion of novel digital platforms.

Step 3: Save Healthcare Resources

By preventing infections, NPAs can halt the spread of the problem at the source, reducing the need for doctor visits, freeing up their time to focus on more serious cases. When implemented, evidence-based self-care practices have a proven capacity

¹⁰ WHO, People-Centered Approach to Addressing Antimicrobial Resistance in Human Health: WHO Core Package of Interventions to Support National Action Plans (2023). <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240082496>

¹¹ WHO, Monitoring the Implementation of the WHO Strategic and Operational Priorities to Address Drug-Resistant Bacterial Infections (2025-2035) (2025). [https://www.who.int/teams/surveillance-prevention-control-AMR/national-action-plan-monitoring-evaluation/monitoring-the-implementation-of-the-who-strategic-and-operational-priorities-to-address-drug-resistant-bacterial-infections-\(2025-2035\)](https://www.who.int/teams/surveillance-prevention-control-AMR/national-action-plan-monitoring-evaluation/monitoring-the-implementation-of-the-who-strategic-and-operational-priorities-to-address-drug-resistant-bacterial-infections-(2025-2035))

¹² American Public Health Association, Community Health Workers Section (2025). <https://www.apha.org/apha-communities/member-sections/community-health-workers>

¹³ Kalungia, Aubrey Chichonyi & St, Anja & Clair-Jones, et. al. UK and Zambian Pharmacists Working Together: Improving Antimicrobial Stewardship and Education (2016). <https://www.fip.org/abstracts?page=abstracts&action=item&item=21442>

¹⁴ Garau, J., Bassetti, M. Role of pharmacists in antimicrobial stewardship programmes. *Int J Clin Pharm* 40, 948–952 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11096-018-0675-z>

¹⁵ Tumwine C., Kiggundu R., Lwigale F., Mwanja H., Katumba H., Hope M., ... Byonanebye D. Strengthening Community Antimicrobial Stewardship in Africa: A Systematic Review of the Roles, Challenges, and Opportunities of Community Health and Animal Health Workers (2025). Wellcome Open Research. <https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.24387.1>

¹⁶ Makerere University, Community Health Workers Trained on Antimicrobial Stewardship in Wakiso District (2024). <https://sph.mak.ac.ug/community-health-workers-trained-on-antimicrobial-stewardship-in-wakiso-district/>

to free over 2.8 billion physician hours annually, allowing them to focus on patients requiring specialized diagnostic and therapeutic interventions.¹⁷ This data highlights the critical integration of NPAs into primary health care frameworks and stewardship programs within communities.¹⁸

Investing in self-care interventions with NPAs results in substantial economic and health system benefits. Global evidence points to potential healthcare savings exceeding \$179 billion annually, accompanied by 39 million quality-adjusted life years gained.¹⁹ By enabling individuals to effectively manage hygiene and minor infections, self-care can free up physician time, limit hospital admissions brought about by infections, and decrease antibiotic use. Such empowerment is especially vital in low-resource settings, where healthcare infrastructure is hard to reach or overstretched.

What is more, self-care empowers communities and individuals alike by giving individuals greater control over their health, while preserving the resources of overstretched healthcare systems.

Conclusion: Sustainable AMR Containment Begins in Everyday Care

Addressing AMR demands holistic strategies grounded in evidence-based prevention and equitable access to care. NPAs and self-care initiatives are critical to making it happen. Wide access to non-prescription antimicrobials that treat viral, fungal, bacterial, and parasitic infections, disinfect wounds, as-well as prevent infection and support hygiene through everyday products like soaps and disinfectants, leads to increased infection prevention and control, supports effective antibiotic management and enables efficient use of healthcare resources.

Community healthcare workers and pharmacists are indispensable champions in the fight against AMR, bridging knowledge and practice gaps that enable communities and individuals to care for themselves. As we enter World Antimicrobial Awareness Week 2025, it is key that policymakers, health systems, and communities alike prioritize non-prescription antimicrobials and self-care initiatives in global AMR responses. This approach can reduce global morbidity and protect the efficacy of prescription antibiotics for future generations.

¹⁷ Global Self-Care Federation, Economic & Social Value of Self-Care Report (2022).
<https://www.selfcarefederation.org/ecosoc-report>

¹⁸ WHO, People-Centered Approach to Addressing Antimicrobial Resistance in Human Health: WHO Core Package of Interventions to Support National Action Plans (2023).
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240082496>

¹⁹ Global Self-Care Federation, Economic & Social Value of Self-Care Report (2022).
<https://www.selfcarefederation.org/ecosoc-report>

About the author



Greg Perry was appointed as the Director-General of the GSCF in January 2025. Formerly, he held leadership positions in global health organizations, including IFPMA, the Medicines Patent Pool and Medicines for Europe, focusing on promoting access to medicines and healthcare innovation. Greg leads efforts to advocate for self-care practices worldwide, aiming to improve health outcomes and foster sustainable healthcare systems. His extensive experience in health policy and international collaboration positions him to effectively advance the federation's mission.

For more information, read the Global Self Care Federation's brief on Non-Prescription Antimicrobials [here](#). The Global Self-Care Federation is dedicated to a world where self-care increasingly contributes to better health and more sustainable healthcare systems. We represent associations and manufacturers in the self-care industry, working closely with our members and relevant stakeholder groups to ensure evidence-based self-care products and solutions are recognized as key contributors to health for individuals and systems worldwide.

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