

Drug firms face fines for lack of antibiotic action

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Pharmaceutical companies that are not researching new antibiotics should face fines if the industry fails to agree a deal with the government within six months, a leading government adviser on superbugs has said.

Ministers are offering to pay companies on a subscription model that would give them a guaranteed income if they produce a successful drug.

Lord O'Neill of Gatley, author of a landmark report on antibiotic resistance for David Cameron in 2015, said that if this carrot did not produce results, ministers should wield the stick of a compulsory levy to stimulate research.

Overuse of antibiotics is speeding resistance of bacteria to the drugs and it is regarded as one of the gravest threat to modern medicine, as common infections would once again kill if the medicines stop working. Lord O'Neill estimated that without global action such superbugs would kill 10 million people a year, becoming a bigger killer than cancer, by 2050.

No new class of antibiotics has been discovered for decades because pharmaceutical companies are reluctant to spend money researching the area. Unlike with most drugs, they cannot expect blockbuster sales because any new antibiotic would be held in reserve for when standard ones fail.

This week Matt Hancock, the health secretary, announced plans inspired by Lord O'Neill to pay companies upfront if they develop a successful drug. The NHS would pay a fixed fee of millions of pounds a year for the right to use the drug rather than paying for the amount of medicine used. "It's like being a Spotify subscriber rather than a vinyl record shopper," Mr Hancock said.

The plan has been broadly welcomed by scientists and in a letter to *The Times*,

Lord O'Neill said he hoped the scheme would be "the beginning of a breakthrough in the pursuit of new useful antibiotics".

The pharmaceutical industry is resisting another of Lord O'Neill's proposals, known as pay or play, which would compel companies that did not research antibiotics to pay a levy, which would fund scientists who do.

A six-month deadline has been set to thrash out details of the subscription model. Lord O'Neill warns: "Pharmaceutical companies should proactively respond. If they do not, then perhaps the time for some version of 'pay or play' is getting closer."

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has resisted the idea, saying it would damage goodwill and arguing that it is better for government and companies to work to find a mutually beneficial system rather than argue about a punitive tax. "We don't think pay or play is the answer," Sheuli Porkess, the association's deputy chief scientific officer, said. "We shouldn't write the new model off before we've tried it. It's an ambitious plan but we're confident it's going to work."

Government plans also include targets to cut antibiotic use in the NHS by 15 per cent over five years. One in five antibiotic prescriptions is thought to be unnecessary and health chiefs are promising better tests to ensure that the drugs are only used against the right infections.

Mark Woolhouse, professor of infectious disease immunology at the University of Edinburgh, said: "Achieving these targets will require a concerted and sustained effort. There is no easy solution and we need to implement effective measures in our hospitals and at our GP surgeries. There has been progress to date, but levels of antimicrobial resistance continue to rise."

Letters, page 30