

Gabriel Wikström's AMR speech at LIF's Almedalen seminar, June 5, 2016

Mr. Gabriel Wikström, Minister for Health Care, Public Health and Sport, on June 5 disclosed that the Government had decided to further investigate a new price model for antibiotics, based on LIF's proposal. On the same day he also participated in LIF's AMR seminar at the Almedalen Political week. There he made an impassioned introductory speech about the vital importance of focusing on AMR as one of mankind's biggest challenges.

This is an unofficial translation of Mr Wikström's speech, in its entirety, without editing. The translation is made by LIF.

Thank you for arranging this seminar, and giving me the opportunity to participate.

I would like to start with a personal reflection. I have, which might be surprising to you, already been politically active for rather a large number of years. Furthermore, I have been *interested* in politics for an even longer period. I am sure that I share this with many of you; being interested in politics, interested in *society*, interested not least in society's historical development. And when you have this kind of interest, I am sure that many have had the same thought that I have had: Imagine if you were present at one of those historic junctions, one of those important moments in time where history can take either this or that direction. These moments often concern avoiding major disasters with potentially catastrophic consequences for entire nations, yes even for mankind as such.

It might sound a bit presumptuous, but when I became minister – for policy sectors of which I have had no previous working experience – I realized that my remit was not just about securing the supply of well-trained personnel in health care, or how we could improve the use of resources in this fantastic sector, or what we should do about tobacco use or how to strengthen sport conditions: I have also got one of these truly historic issues on my plate.

I realized that I had to ask myself: How would I handle a situation which can turn out OK, but which also can – if you excuse the expression – go straight to hell? Make no mistake: that option is a distinct possibility when we talk about antibiotic resistance and the development that we have before us.

From day one at this job, antimicrobial resistance have been at the top of my agenda as minister, and I would also say that it is among the top issues for the government.

Of course, this is not something that we have invented entirely on our own, as you know better than I. We build on work from previous governments and other Swedish stakeholders, spread over many, many years. But it has been a priority for us to continue this work and to

see in what ways we can contribute to avoiding this potential disaster: That we in the future will have a situation where we still can engage in basic health care, where we can continue to treat cancer and where we can conduct sophisticated operations; that we are not thrown back to the proverbial Dark Ages of medicine – for that is exactly what is at stake.

It was in many ways a liberating experience when we, last year in Geneva, could finalize the global action plan and got unanimous backing for it even if it was negotiations to the last moment, where different interests stood against each other. But equally important as the global action plan and that we for the first time did agree on which actions were necessary to implement for all nations of the world to get AMR under control and reverse the negative spiral – equally important was the signal from countries like Sweden but also the UK and others which have been active in this work, that the problem is not solved just by agreeing on an action plan; it is now that the real work begins.

Our first action, even before the plan was adopted, was that we together with the UK Government invited a number of key nations to a meeting to jointly form what we call an "Alliance of Champions", that is to say a number of nations taking a leadership role for this issue. Our task was to establish a high-level meeting of the UN General Assembly. Not that such a meeting in itself will solve any problems, but to show that we are continuing the fight and that we raise it to a new level on the international scene.

I am convinced, and it has been made many comparisons over the years, I am convinced that it is reasonable to compare antimicrobial resistance to climate change. There are many similarities, foremost among them that the first warnings signals regarding climate change came from experts who saw the signs much, much earlier than the rest of us. The next step was conferences, exchange of views between scientists, discussions on definitions as well as on what was really human impact and what was not. That was what happened first, before the political level began to be implicated.

But as necessary as the scientists' alerts and the conferences and the discussions on definitions was, it was only when the issue was lifted to the absolute top level of politicians that we could start to develop strategies and plans to get real change, and thus be able to start to reverse the present dangerous trend.

The issue of AMR has travelled exactly the same path; warnings from scientists and experts, petitions about the seriousness of the situation, and that it really is an as crucially important issue that we, today, realize and acknowledge that it is.

Last year's meeting in Geneva really *was* a breakthrough at the political level, but for the impetus to be sufficiently strong for actual decisions on the necessary actions, we need to build additional pressure. For this to happen, we must move from the level of ordinary Health Ministers, to the level of Heads of State, Prime Ministers and Finance Ministers. We must get decision-makers, we must get my colleagues around the world, to realize that this is a question that encompasses all dimensions of society. I maintain that it is not strictly a health care issue, but rather a question about society and which form of society we would like to be

part of, and what sort of relation we should have to each other. That is where the question stands today.

I am very happy that we during the spring, or rather during last autumn, got the go-ahead that the AMR issue will be on the agenda for the UN General Assembly meeting this coming autumn. There we will have the opportunity to primarily attract attention, and create awareness – but also, of course, to begin to draw up guidelines for the next step in the work to combat antibiotic resistance.

It is a stunning political development that we have behind us, and I hope it is an equally fantastic development that we have before us.

What, then, is the watchword in this work? I think, just like Anders (Tegnell) touched upon in his intervention: one of the key elements that must be present in this work is *equality*. And why is that? Well, it is quite clear, and it was clear already in the negotiations for the meeting in Geneva last year: If we do not see the whole spectrum of the problem of antibiotic resistance issue, then we will not be able to get the commitment and the attendance of world nations we need to move forward.

An old adage states that no chain is stronger than its weakest link, and it certainly applies in this work. Virtually the entire world must be involved and make progress in this area if we are to eliminate the threat of antibiotic resistance; if we are to get ahead.

Therefore it is important to not only – as many of the developed countries of the world a little carelessly have done – talk about limiting the use of antibiotics. It is equally important, as Anders (Tegnell) touched upon, to talk about how we create access to the right antibiotic.

How can we ensure both that the availability of antibiotics should be limited to India's middle class, so that it can no longer be bought over the counter like candy and used for colds and everything else that it has no effect on – how can we also ensure that the availability of proper antibiotics is increased for India's rural poor? That is equally important, because if we do not solve the latter problem, we will never get the attendance and popular mandate that is so vitally important for further steps forward to be taken.

That Sweden is actively involved on the international scene is sometimes contested, not least in connection with the candidature for the UN Security Council. But I think that the work on antibiotic resistance is perhaps the best evidence of why a small nation like Sweden sometimes can hit over its own weight class, and that we can have a larger footprint than what is generally expected.

But what we must never forget – and what *I* must never forget when I'm in the elegant meeting rooms in Geneva or New York – is that my credibility and my ability to get my colleagues and the important people in UN system to listen to me and what Sweden has to contribute, hinges fundamentally upon that we have done our own homework – that we not only saw the problem early, but that we also implemented changes early – and not only in the health care sector but also in agriculture. That we early on walked the talk, and that we have

honored the motto "One Health Perspective". We have managed to mobilize many stakeholders from different sectors, and managed in getting them to jointly move towards the same goal. It is precisely *that* which has made Sweden hit above its weight class in this field, and that, which, in spite of our limited resources, have made many leaders around the world to listen to us.

It is precisely for that reason that the focus cannot solely be on what Sweden has done on the international scene: building momentum, raising awareness and pushing forward – it is equally important that we within our own borders updates our AMR strategy, that we continue the efforts to achieve consensus both in the Swedish Parliament and among other stakeholders in society about our mission and the strategic choices we have done; but also that we in other areas of the Government's work, especially in the National Pharmaceutical Strategy and others, can achieve a clear focus on the AMR problem. It is the only way forward. And it is also the only way to continue to be trusted on the international scene.

I mentioned that equality is key for the work that needs to be done, and my example was – as is very often the case – those who today suffer the most as a result of lack of equality, that is to say the poor in rural India and all over the world. But is also vitally important that the developed world – we who have come very far – feel that also we benefit from global cooperation. That we do not cooperate just out of charity, or that we feel the immediate threat of antibiotic resistance creeping up on us – but that we also see that it gives added value if we make a clear commitment.

It is for that reason a natural next step for countries like Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands, USA and others to be ready to take on the challenge: How do we create new economic incentive models for research and development of new antibiotics? And above all, how can we link discussions on such new models to a discussion on the long term sustainable use of antibiotics?

As many have said before: We do not want new antibiotics! If there would be a scientific article, or a press release, tomorrow that says "I have a completely new form of antibiotics!", I would get the shivers, because given with what nonchalance and carelessness we have dealt with this unique and valuable resource that is antibiotics over the last seventy to eighty years, I would be very worried how we would manage and preserve something entirely new.

So let us discuss new economic models, but let us never forget the important challenge to manage both the existing antibiotics that we in fact already have and the new ones that hopefully will be developed. Because without that perspective all resources that we allocate to this will in the long run be utterly meaningless.

At the end of this introduction, I cannot refrain from pointing out that even if this issue of antimicrobial resistance seems to be new to many all over the world; it was something that Flemming warned us against in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech more than 60 years ago. He did indeed warn us for what might happen. So no one in leading positions, no one who has bothered to check the facts, can say that "we did not know".

This is all about that we need more political will, and clear political engagement, worldwide.

Thank you.