

Drug-resistant tuberculosis continues to be serious health threat says UN health agency

1 March 2017 – The United Nations health agency stressed the critical need the critical need for research and development of new antibiotics to tackle the threat of drug-resistant tuberculosis.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in the past 50 years, only two new antibiotics addressing drug-resistant tuberculosis have made it to the third phase of trials. These medicines are now tested on patients to assess efficacy, effectiveness and safety, and will still have to pass the final stage before they can be sold.

“Addressing drug-resistant tuberculosis research is a top priority for WHO and for the world,” says WHO Director-General Margaret Chan. “More than US\$ 800 million per year is currently necessary to fund badly needed research into new antibiotics to treat tuberculosis.”

Drug-resistant tuberculosis is a condition in which the disease causing organism is resistant to at least isoniazid and rifampin, the two most potent tuberculosis drugs.

There were an estimated 580,000 cases and 250,000 related deaths in 2015, about 14 per cent of all tuberculosis related deaths for the year. Only 125,000 were started on treatment, and just half of those people were cured.

During a meeting of world leaders in September 2016, then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned that drug-resistant tuberculosis has been identified in 105 countries.

The disease is treatable and curable by using second-line drugs. However, second-line treatment options are limited and require extensive chemotherapy (up to two years of treatment) with medicines that are expensive and toxic.

A series of high-level global meetings on tuberculosis have been scheduled. Drug-resistant tuberculosis and research will be major themes at the WHO conference in Moscow this coming November. It will also be a key agenda item at the UN General Assembly high-level meeting on tuberculosis in 2018.