



Could you be an Antibiotic Ambassador?



Fergus Allerton explains the motivation and aspirations behind the Antibiotic Guardian Schools Ambassadors Scheme and highlights experiences from the pilot year, serving as a call to action for other antimicrobial stewards to get involved this year.

For the last few years, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), previously Public Health England, has been encouraging healthcare professionals to step out of their comfort zones and provide a talk to children in a local school. Speakers are provided with a wealth of useful resources including template letters to the headteacher, ideas for engaging games, draft PowerPoint presentations and even sample talks, as part of a comprehensive toolkit. The aim of the event is to increase awareness of important public health topics including hand hygiene, infection prevention and antibiotics. It was in 2023 that vets had the opportunity of getting involved too.

Why is this important?

The One Health threat from antimicrobial resistance should not be underestimated. Recent publications in the *Lancet* have highlighted that 39 million people could lose their lives around the world due to AMR in the next 25 years. Multi-drug resistant infections are already accounting for over a million deaths every year. Veterinary staff have a key role in conversations around AMR and can contribute to measures to tackle this threat. By advocating for greater AMR and antimicrobial stewardship awareness among the general public we can foster a collaborative effort to reduce this problem. Increasingly, we encounter familiar stewardship messages such as 'Keep antibiotics working', 'Handle antimicrobials with care' and 'No amount of antibiotics will get rid of your cold' when we visit the dentist or doctor and even during the ad break of I'm a Celebrity. By bringing these themes to a young audience we have the opportunity to instil improved behaviour patterns from the outset.



How can you get involved?

Any member of the practice team can become a school ambassador for the antibiotic guardian scheme, whether it's the vets, the vet nurses, the reception team or even the practice manager. A willingness to speak to a group of school children is all that is required! UKHSA has compiled a useful resource kit to make the process as easy as possible. With support from the VMD, there are now animal health components to this too. The kit includes material that has been carefully tiered to the age of children with introductory themes and hand hygiene demonstrations for primary school children and a more in-depth and scientific explanation for an older (secondary school) audience.

Every year World AMR Awareness Week (WAAW) runs from the 18 to 24 November and features a multitude of ways to get involved. For example, you can 'go blue for AMR' as Blackpool Tower did during Strictly Week, become an antibiotic guardian at antibioticguardian.com (veterinary staff still trail dentists on number of pledges made 🙄) or take part in the Antibiotic Amnesty, which runs specifically throughout November. Given the razmataz surrounding WAAW it seems a natural time to offer to deliver a talk at a local school. However, presentations can take place whenever suits you and the school programme.

Contact with the school can be via a letter to the headteacher (see: <https://antibioticguardian.com/schools-ambassadors-registration-feedback/>) or via the well-established route of family member, friend or colleague with children at the school. It would be fantastic to find ways to extend this project into under-represented areas wherever possible.

If you do organize a talk, please send any feedback to fergus.allerton@willows.uk.net. I will collate this information and create a list of veterinary ambassadors on behalf of UKHSA and ESPAUR, the VMD and the RCVS Fellowship. Sharing our successes with these organizations will hopefully build a sustainable venture for years to come. You could also promote any engagement on social media by using the hashtag #WAAW2024, #antibioticguardian or #ConfrontingAMR.

What should I talk about?

The content of the talk is up to you. The online resources provide some suggestions and even a complete script for those who would like a ready-made



FIGURE 1: The Glitter Experiment illustrates the transmission of infection in action.

version. One practical illustration of the transmission of infection in action is the Glitter Experiment (Figure 1). This also offers a chance to call for volunteers (expect a lot of hands) to help out. The first child should rub a mixture of hand sanitizer, hand cream or washing up liquid and a colourful glitter over their hands. They can then vigorously shake hands with the next child, who shakes hands with someone else and so on down the line of helpers. At the end of the experiment, you can have a close look at their hands, showing the passage of the glitter from one child to the next. This short segment clearly shows how easy it is to transfer pathogens from one person to another.

Disease transmission segways nicely into a reminder of the importance and technique of regular hand washing. Hand hygiene is recognized by the World Health Organization as the single most important measure to stop the spread of infection. Appropriate application prevents up to 50% of avoidable infections acquired during health care delivery. Instilling these principles into children from a young age could create life-saving habits for years to come.

Other topics that may be of interest include the futility of using antibiotics to treat viral infections and the differences between viruses and bacteria, why we need antibiotics and how they can help save lives, and how to dispose of leftover antibiotics in the home. You could also instigate a discussion of what vets do, the animals we treat and the variety of roles available in the profession. Maybe there could be some future colleagues in the audience?

The best audience ever....

Several vets participated in last year's pilot scheme and consistently described a positive experience with a receptive and friendly crowd.

Julian Hoad writes: "I'm keen to repeat it this year at other schools in my locality: it was very well-received with good engagement from the pupils (who were primary school kids). I had feedback from a teacher a few weeks later when a child proudly announced to her that she had a cold, but it was 'probably a vidus (sic)' and so she wasn't going to get an antibiotic!"

Ian Battersby was brave (foolhardy) enough to deliver the talk to his local secondary school: "I don't

mind admitting feeling a sudden 'out of comfort zone' moment as over one hundred 15-year-olds came into the hall to take their seats. But this quickly disappeared and as well as gaining another level of respect for teachers, it was truly a pleasure for me to share insights on such an important topic to not only those who plan to join a medical or scientific profession, but also those who will choose other careers. AMR is a true One Health issue and, as such, engagement across all sectors and professions and all age groups is important. "Feedback from the school vindicated the efforts too as the teacher outlined:

"It was excellent for the pupils to have Ian come in and speak about antimicrobial resistance as not only do

they need this information for life but also they require this information for their GCSE. The boys really enjoyed the talk and the feedback has been really positive."

What could possibly go wrong?

For veterinary personnel it is already a bit late to take heed of W.C. Field's famous phrase 'never work with children or animals'; nonetheless, careful preparation does help. One of last year's ambassadors managed to dye the hands of several volunteering children bright pink after mixing biodegradable glitter with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Fortunately, the staining effects were not long-lasting and the children thoroughly enjoyed their 'glow in the dark' limbs! It is also worth checking what presentation facilities are available at the school so that you don't arrive expecting to show a nifty set of enticing slides only to find yourself delivering an improvised speech on the hoof.

Conclusion

I leave the final word to some of those that have already delivered a talk:

"I would strongly encourage others within the profession to get involved, you won't regret it!"

Ian Battersby

"I found it an extremely positive and rewarding experience. My children were proud of me too (I think)! One parent came to find me a few days later to say that her daughter had been teaching them at home, the differences between viruses and bacteria. Even if it touches one child, it has been a success!"

Sophie Herbert

