

Preserving the Miracle: Reflections from the Frontline

I was fortunate to spend an evening at the Southwark Playhouse Elephant watching a moving musical called '*Lifeline*.' It tells the story of Alexander Fleming and his 1928 discovery of penicillin—the "miracle cure" that changed the world—while also following a modern-day doctor in Edinburgh struggling with infections that no longer respond to those very same drugs.

Seeing a chorus of real-life doctors, nurses, and scientists on stage really hit home. It reminded me why, as your GP, I sometimes have to say "no" to a request for antibiotics. It's not because I want you to stay unwell; it's because I want to make sure these life-saving medicines still work for your children and grandchildren.

Why the "Miracle" is Fading

Antibiotic resistance (AMR) happens when bacteria change so much that our medicines no longer work against them. While this is a natural process, it has been accelerated by the overuse and misuse of these drugs in humans and animals.

The statistics are sobering. In 2023, there were an estimated 66,730 serious antibiotic-resistant infections in the UK—a number that is now higher than it was before the pandemic. When antibiotics stop working, even common procedures like hip replacements, C-sections, and cancer treatments become much riskier because we can't effectively prevent or treat the infections that may follow.

Why I Might Not Prescribe Antibiotics Today

You may have noticed that we no longer routinely prescribe antibiotics for conditions like chest infections, sore throats and ear infections in children.

There are three main reasons for this:

1. They don't work on viruses: Most of these common winter bugs are caused by viruses, which antibiotics simply cannot kill.
2. Side effects: Antibiotics can cause unpleasant side effects, including rashes and stomach upsets.
3. Protecting the future: Every time we use an antibiotic for a "trivial" condition, we give bacteria a chance to learn how to resist it. This leads to the rise of "superbugs" like MRSA and C. diff, which are incredibly difficult to treat.

How You Can Help

The play '*Lifeline*' asks: "What can each of us... do to be part of the solution?" The answer is actually quite simple:

- * Trust your healthcare team: If we advise that antibiotics aren't needed, it's based on the best evidence to keep you safe.
- * Take them as directed: If you are prescribed antibiotics, never skip doses and never "save some for later."
- * Don't share: Never share your prescription with friends or family.
- * Stay vaccinated: Keeping up with your vaccines helps prevent infections from starting in the first place, reducing the need for antibiotics.

Alexander Fleming once warned that the misuse of penicillin could lead to its downfall. By working together and using these "miracle" drugs wisely, we can ensure they remain a lifeline for generations to come.

Of course, sometimes you may really need antibiotics – and if in doubt, ask us, we are here to help.

Dr Maya Chowdhury