

Publication: The Times

Date: 28.05.19

Media type: Print

Circulation: 406,279

AVE: £1,951

PR Value: £6,243



THE TIMES

20

Tuesday May 28 2019 | THE TIMES

News

Antibiotics in Thames three times over safe limit

David Brown

Concentrations of common antibiotics exceed "safe" levels in rivers around the world by up to 300 times.

The Thames and one of its London tributaries were contaminated with a mixture of five drugs. Ciprofloxacin, which is used to treat respiratory, urinary and skin infections, peaked at more than three times safe levels.

Last month the United Nations said that infections from bacteria resistant to antibiotics could cause 10 million deaths a year by 2050.

For a study led by the University of York, 92 testing kits were dispatched to

researchers around the world who were asked to take samples along their local river system. They searched for 14 common antibiotics in 72 countries.

The drugs were found at 65 per cent of the sites. Locations where safe levels were exceeded by the greatest degree were in Bangladesh, Kenya, Ghana, Pakistan and Nigeria. The limits were most frequently exceeded in Asia and Africa but sites in Europe, North America and South America also had concerning levels.

Eight per cent of the sites tested in Europe were above safe limits, with the Danube the continent's most polluted river. In the Thames and its London

tributary the researchers found a maximum total antibiotic concentration of 233 nanograms per litre. In Bangladesh the concentration was 170 times higher.

Metronidazole, which is used to treat infections of the skin and mouth, exceeded safe levels by the biggest margin. Concentrations at one site in Bangladesh were 300 times greater than the limit.

Dr John Wilkinson, one of the authors of the report, said that in Europe, pharmaceuticals, like other chemicals consumed by humans, were directed to wastewater treatment plants but did not completely degrade before eventually entering rivers. "We're really

beginning to understand that there are concentrations of antibiotics in the environment above which bacteria may select for resistance to antimicrobials," he said.

"The ultimate worry here is that these pathogens may become resistant to the medication we use to kill their infection in humans."

Professor Alistair Boxall, of the York Environmental Sustainability Institute, said: "The results are quite eye-opening and worrying, demonstrating the widespread contamination of river systems around the world with antibiotic compounds. Many scientists and policymakers now recognise the role of the

natural environment in the antimicrobial resistance problem. Our data show that antibiotic contamination of rivers could be an important contributor.

"Solving the problem is going to be a mammoth challenge and will need investment in infrastructure for waste and wastewater treatment, tighter regulation and the cleaning up of already contaminated sites."

The "safe" levels were set by the AMR Industry Alliance, a group of companies seeking to tackle antimicrobial resistance. The findings are being presented this week at the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry's annual meeting in Helsinki.

Gold medal for Asda's Transylvanian white 'with bite'

A £5.25 bottle of supermarket white from Transylvania has scooped a gold medal at the world's largest wine awards. Asda is braced for a surge in demand for the Wine Atlas Feteasca Regala, which it says is made from a Romanian grape that has a "modern vibe" and "sassy crispness". The last time one of Asda's value wines won a prize its website crashed under the weight of drinkers' interest. Wines from Morrisons and Marks & Spencer also won medals in the Decanter World Wine Awards, announced today, for which experts judged 17,000 wines from 57 countries. English wines underlined their

growing international reputation by taking seven places in the top 50 wines. The Wiston Estate in West Sussex, Charles Palmer Vineyards in East Sussex, Camel Valley in Cornwall, and Chapel Down and Squerries, both in Kent, won medals. A spokesman for *Decanter* magazine said: "The results highlight Britain's increasing influence on the global wine industry." Asda said: "We pride ourselves on developing not only great quality, but great value wines and are delighted to have been awarded gold for our Feteasca Regala." French wines continued to dominate with 13 best in show awards.

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