

Titel

Ideal Conditions to Meet the Existing Need for Information

Communicating Antibiotic Resistance within
the Framework of National Research Program
NRP 49

Media report on the public opinion poll 2003

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A survey of popular opinion on the issue

National Research Program NRP 49 mandated gfs.bern (formerly GfS-Research Institute, Politics and State, Bern) to conduct applied communications research in the issue area of antibiotic resistance. Two main questions guided the representative public survey:

- How is antibiotic resistance perceived by the Swiss public in the year 2003?
- What are the necessary preconditions for the effective dissemination of information on NRP 49?

The exact content and wording of the questionnaire was developed on the basis of a qualitative pre-study.

The technical specifications of the study are the following:

- *Title / contracted institute: "Communicating Antibiotic Resistance" - Basic Research Study 2003 conducted by gfs.bern, mandated by National Research Program NRP 49.*
- *Theoretical population: Residential population of Switzerland aged 18 and older; German-, French-, and Italian-speaking.*
- *Survey method: CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviews).*
- *Time-frame of the survey: 6 – 17 October 2003.*
- *Sample size: 1007, systematic random selection with control quotas.*
- *Statistical sampling error (with a sampling distribution of 50/50): + / - 3.1 %.*
- *Citation: Golder, Lukas / Longchamp, Claude: Ideal Conditions to Meet the Existing Need for Information. Communicating Antibiotic Resistance within the Framework of National Research Program NRP 49. Bern. gfs.bern.*
- *Full Report: available at www.gfsbern.ch/publikationen/antibiotika*

Personal experience in competition with information provided by the media

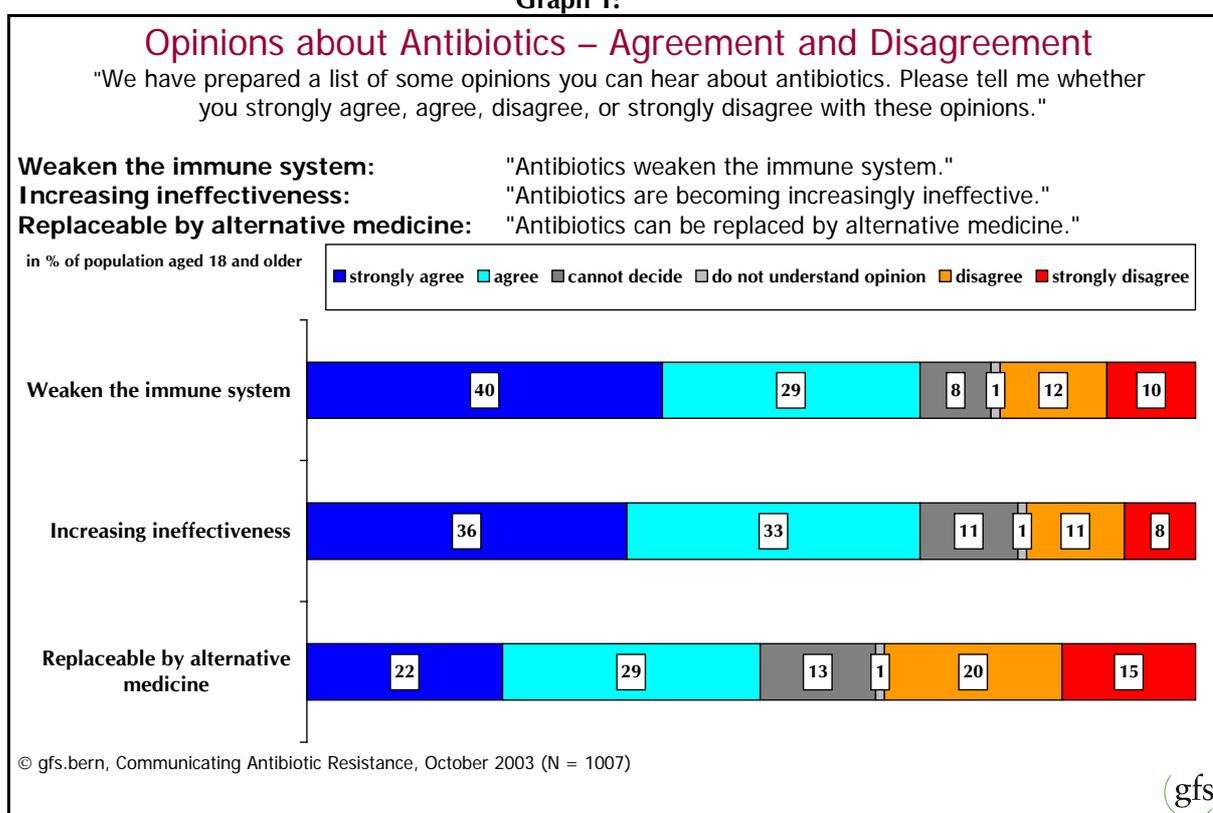
The Swiss public seems to consider the importance of public health issues in general and antibiotics in particular in everyday life as high. 87% of the population aged 18 and older are "highly interested" or "moderately interested" in questions of public health. 34% of the Swiss population have used antibiotics within the last two years.

Regarding these issues, personal experience, interest and concern strongly compete with information provided by the media. Such everyday-life experience generates a clear majority of 79% feeling very well or well informed about questions of public health. The Swiss public does not feel overwhelmed by this topic, and it is generally interested in it.

Spontaneous response to antibiotics sober, but passive attitude clearly negative

Regarding active knowledge about antibiotics – measured in the survey by an open-end question – a sober and objective understanding of the matter prevails. In particular, antibiotics are seldom actively associated with the problem of antibiotic resistance. However, the outcome is different when it comes to passive knowledge, which can be activated by closed-end questions with given answers. When asked about specific arguments, the Swiss public expresses a general understanding of antibiotics that has clearly negative connotations. One of the opinions frequently mentioned is that antibiotics are becoming increasingly ineffective and that they weaken the immune system. Furthermore, a number of respondents see alternatives to antibiotics outside conventional medicine.¹

Graph 1:



Majority is aware of antibiotic resistance; spontaneous response is level-headed

Considering the high importance of antibiotics and health issues in everyday life, it is not surprising that a majority of 54% of the population is aware of antibiotic resistance. As soon as a certain issue is known to the majority of the population, we talk about "high public awareness".

¹ These are widely accepted but false assumptions. Scientific rectification: see media documentation on antibiotic resistance regarding widely-held popular misconceptions; points 1, 2 and 3.

Similar to the spontaneous responses to antibiotics per se, spontaneous associations with antibiotic resistance are sober and objective. Almost all respondents understand it as a failure of antibiotics to work effectively.

However, equally comparable to the responses to antibiotics, ambivalence is revealed when objective active knowledge about antibiotic resistance (measured by open-end questions) is contrasted with passive knowledge (measured and activated by closed-end questions). Respondents do not differentiate between the various causes of antibiotic resistance, and they frequently consider food / nutrition as the predominant cause. Considering the current topicality of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), genetically engineered foods (GMOs, genetically modified organisms) and antibiotics in foodstuffs, this is not surprising. However, the prominence given to this does not concur with the views of experts on the causes of antibiotic resistance.

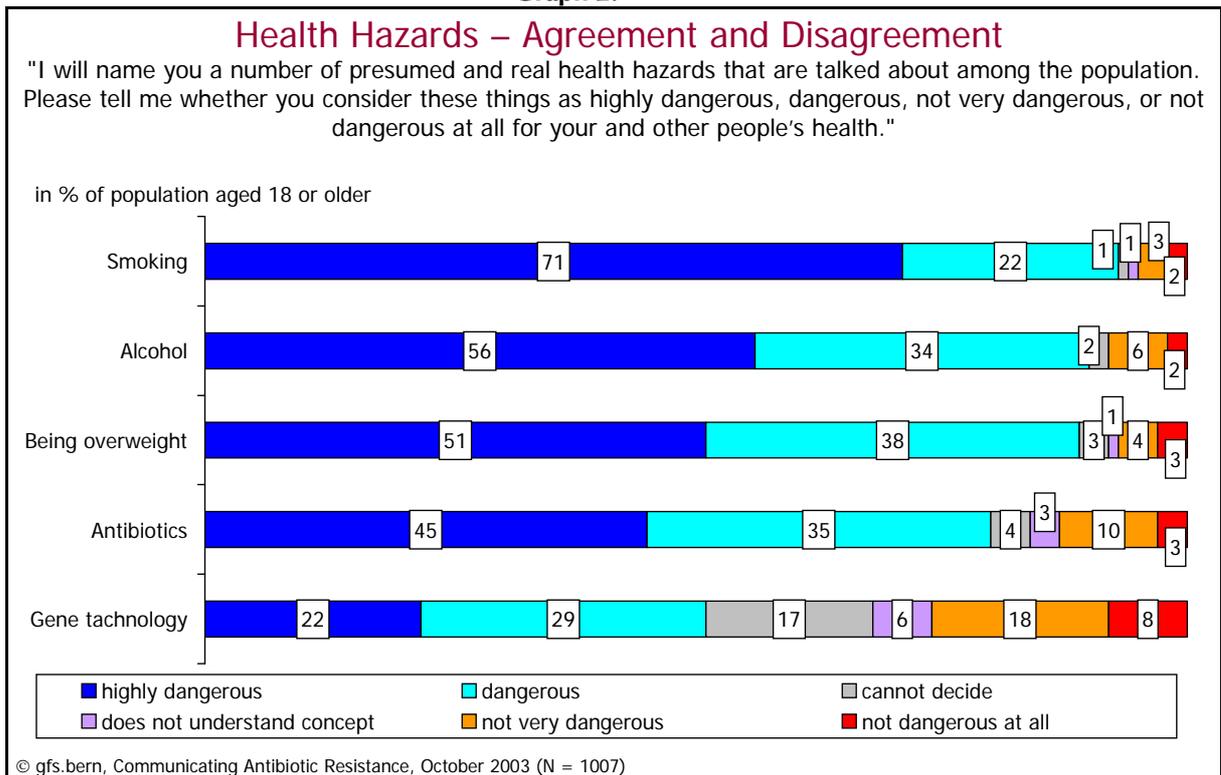
The current general understanding of antibiotic resistance turns the dissemination of information into a difficult task. Just like closed-end questions, any additional information given has the side effect of activating passive knowledge. Personal prejudices and experiences which are often clearly negative thereby occupy the foreground of debate about antibiotics and antibiotic resistance. As long as no additional information is given, an objective understanding of the issue prevails. However, when information is given that is not sufficiently objective, predominantly confused reactions are evoked.

Widespread concern and lack of familiarity cause need for information

Antibiotic resistance is clearly being considered as a problem. 80% of the respondents believe that antibiotic resistance endangers health severely or moderately. While smoking, drinking or being overweight are still considered as more dangerous, the danger associated with antibiotic resistance is rated clearly higher than that associated with gene technology.²

² Scientific background to health hazards: see media documentation on antibiotic resistance regarding widely-held popular misconceptions; point 5.

Graph 2:

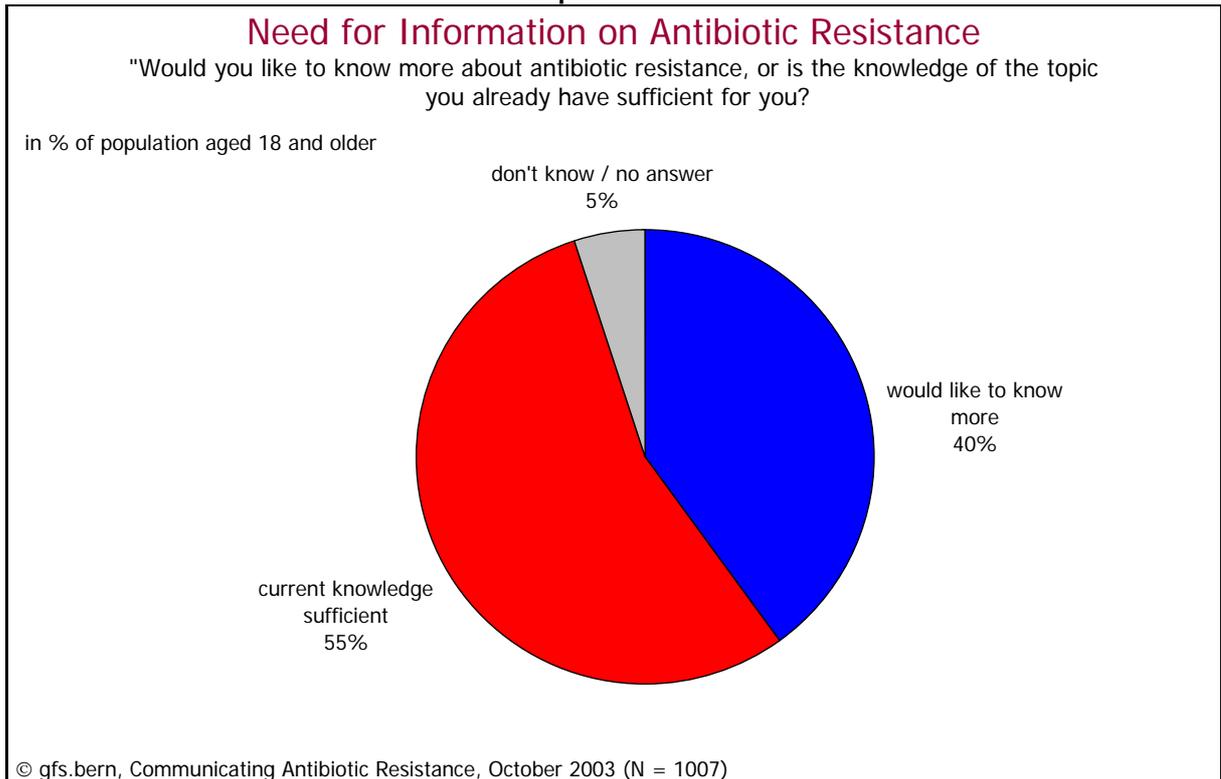


The difficulty in assessing the problem lies in the fact that, compared to other risks, the risk of antibiotic resistance is relatively unknown. Unlike widely discussed topics such as gene technology, there is a lack of familiarity with this issue. As a result, a completely independent assessment of the problem is undertaken. An important aspect of this assessment is the belief that in contrast to gene technology personal behavior can have an effect on the risk constituted by antibiotic resistance, as is the case with smoking or drinking.

Antibiotic resistance can trigger strong, emotional reactions. A majority of respondents (72%) report being concerned about antibiotic resistance. This concern is a feeling of general uneasiness pertaining to the future which is much more widely spread than fear. The latter, however, is also reported by a large minority of 33%.

The combination of personal concern, lack of familiarity and high risk awareness thus explains the need for information on antibiotic resistance. 40% desire more information about the topic, a high figure considering that 79% percent of the population feel generally well or very well informed on general questions of public health.

Graph 3:



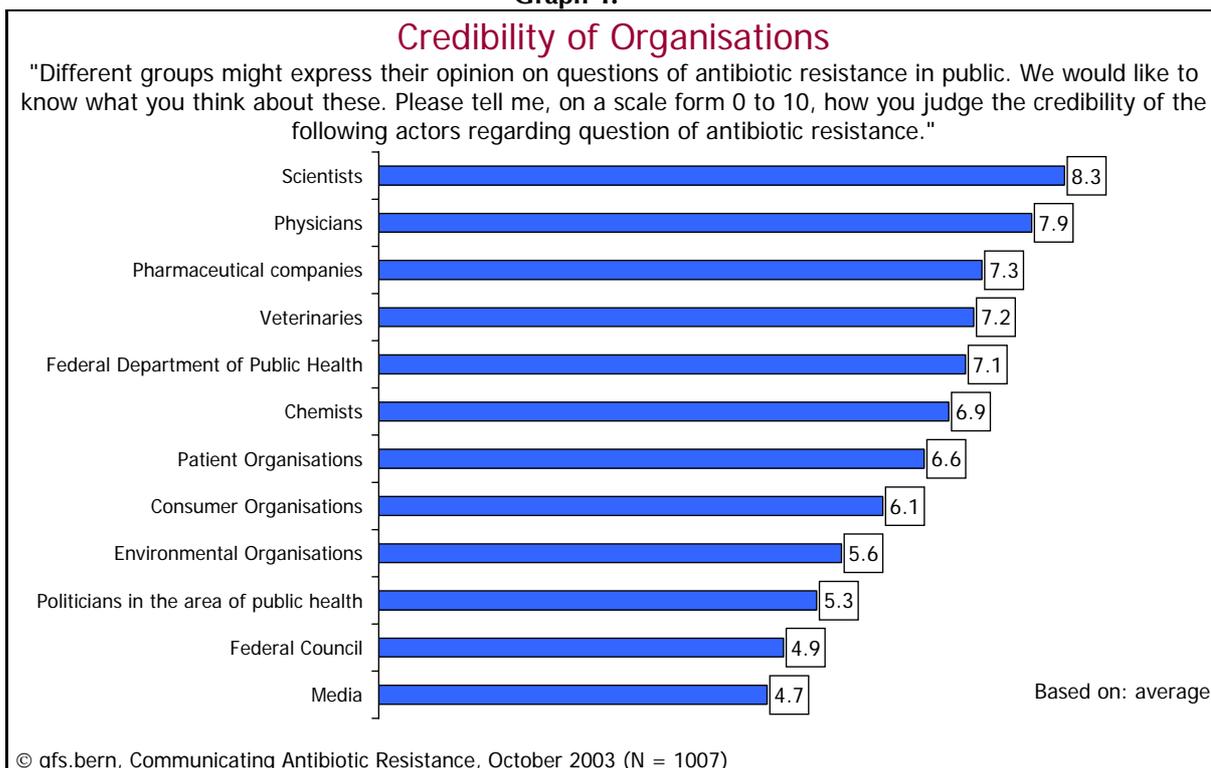
The need for information goes beyond personal concern in case of necessary / prescribed consumption, as the statistical model shows. Widespread negative emotions explain the existing need for information best. Despite a general awareness of the problem, there is a lack of familiarity with it. This leads to insecurity, which triggers a need for information independent of personal consumption of antibiotics.³

Central role for scientists in the dissemination of information

A great advantage for the communication of information is the high credibility of scientists as communicators. Among all groups of actors presented to the respondents in the questionnaire, scientists were judged the most credible, even more credible than physicians. Once more, a need for information can be identified that goes beyond personal concern: Respondents mainly desire information on how to deal with the problem and how to assess the risk.

³ Commentary on the need for information among the population: see media documentation on antibiotic resistance regarding widely-held popular misconceptions; point 6.

Graph 4:



Antibiotic resistance is defined primarily as a scientific and only to a limited extent as a political problem. Two results of the empirical study are linked to this, albeit with different effects: On the one hand, 74% see a need for more basic research; on the other hand, a majority puts so much trust in conventional medicine that the perception of antibiotic resistance as a problem is qualified. 62% of the respondents believe that medical science will always discover new treatment methods and thus keep the problem of antibiotic resistance under control.⁴

Nevertheless, from the point of view of the population the state does have a central role to play. More than three quarters of the population consider public education on the correct way of dealing with antibiotic resistance as important. The state certainly can invest means in informing the public about antibiotic resistance.

Overall, National Research Program NRP 49 has a solid base for its communications activities. The role of science is the most credible of all, and the wish for more basic research is clearly given. Furthermore, the opinion that antibiotic resistance may endanger personal health is held by a clear majority. Finally, many of the survey respondents report a personal need for information on how to deal with antibiotic resistance.

⁴ Scientific rectification of this assumption: see media documentation on antibiotic resistance regarding widely-held popular misconceptions; point 4.