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PRESS RELEASE

British Society for Antimicrobial Chemotherapy (BSAC) responds to Medicine and Healthcare Regulatory Agency decision to make antibiotic Azithromycin available direct from pharmacies

The BSAC is deeply concerned that the MHRA has approved changes to the licensing of the antibiotic Azithromycin from a Prescription Only Medicine to pharmacy availability (POM to P). This change to the licence has enabled a systemic antibiotic to be purchased over the counter, without consultation with a qualified prescribing clinician.

The Society's major concerns are related to the inevitably wider sales and use of antibiotics and our consequent inability to monitor and measure systemic antibiotic usage as we do for prescribed antibiotics. This is the principle reason why the Council of the European Unionⁱ has asked that Member States ensure systemic antibiotics are only available on prescriptionⁱⁱ.

It should also be noted that the Health Protection Agency, through the Gonococcal Resistance to Antimicrobials Surveillance Programme (GRASP), has detected a cluster of gonococcal isolates that exhibit high-level resistance to azithromycin. In response the Department of Health has issued an alert to microbiologists to inform appropriate testingⁱⁱⁱ. The numbers of patients with sexually transmitted diseases are increasing, and often such patients are co-infected with more than one microorganism. It is of utmost importance that we retain the ability to monitor and measure azithromycin usage for both hospital and community use.

It is particularly unfortunate that this has happened during the year that the European Union is holding the first of an annual series of European Antibiotic Days on 18th November 2008, when

the focus will be on the appropriate community use of antibiotics and in encouraging the public to be more conservative in their use of them.

This Society will continue to press the removal of systemic antibacterials from the list of drugs that can be considered for change from prescription only to pharmacy availability.

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ⁱ The European Council brings together the heads of state or government of the European Union and the president of the Commission. It defines the general political guidelines of the European Union. The decisions taken at the European Council meetings represent a major impetus in defining the general political guidelines of the European Union.

ⁱⁱ 2001 Council of the EU recommendation states Member States should "*implement control and preventative measures to support the prudent use of antimicrobial agents and contribute to limiting the spread of communicable diseases by: (a) restricting systemic antibacterial agents to prescription-only use;*"

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.hpa.org.uk/hpr/archives/2008/news1408.htm>