Ecology & Evolution | Feb 9, 2026 | 7 min read | By Bryan White

The Active Approach to Antimicrobial Resistance: How Self-Propagating Genetics Could Erase AMR

Biology * Public Health * DNA

Introduction: The Silent Pandemic of Antimicrobial Resistance

In the calculus of global public health, few biological threats rival the accelerating escalation of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). For nearly a century, modern medicine has relied on a passive pharmacological paradigm: administering small-molecule compounds to inhibit or lyse pathogenic bacteria. While antibiotics have prevented millions of deaths, their widespread clinical and agricultural deployment has imposed intense selective pressure, driving an evolutionary arms race. Bacteria rapidly acquire and disseminate resistance determinants -- frequently encoded on extrachromosomal circular DNA elements known as plasmids -- which traffic resistance genes across species boundaries and convert environmental or commensal microbes into persistent reservoirs of multidrug-resistant infection.

Epidemiological projections estimate that without transformative intervention, AMR could claim up to 10 million lives annually by 2050, surpassing cancer as a leading cause of global mortality.[1] Conventional chemical bactericidal agents cannot resolve this crisis alone because they leave intact the mobile genetic blueprints of resistance within survivors and environmental biofilms. In February 2026, researchers at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), led by Saluja Kaduwal alongside principal investigators Ethan Bier and Justin R. Meyer, published a landmark study in npj Antimicrobials and Resistance introducing "Pro-Active Genetics" (Pro-AG) -- a self-propagating conjugal genetic system engineered to autonomously locate, cleave, and overwrite antibiotic resistance genes across bacterial populations.[1][2] By repurposing bacterial plasmid transfer into an active genetic engineering platform, Pro-AG shifts antimicrobial therapy from chemical attrition to targeted genetic disarmament.

Molecular Architecture of Pro-Active Genetics (pPro-MobV)

The conceptual architecture of Pro-AG derives from gene drives, originally developed to bias Mendelian inheritance in sexually reproducing vectors such as mosquitoes to suppress malaria transmission. Because bacteria reproduce asexually via binary fission and lack meiotic chromosomal pairing, the UCSD team adapted the drive mechanism to operate on plasmids transmitted horizontally during conjugation.[3] The resulting therapeutic vector, designated pPro-MobV, integrates three modular components of synthetic biology into an autonomous genetic conversion platform:

* Broad-Host-Range Replication Backbone (pBBR1): Rather than relying on narrow-host laboratory cloning vectors, pPro-MobV utilizes the medium-copy pBBR1 origin of replication, enabling stable maintenance across diverse Gram-negative bacteria -- including Pseudomonas, Klebsiella, and Salmonella -- in addition to Escherichia coli.[4]

* IncP RK2 Conjugation Machinery: Adapted from the broad-host-range RK2 plasmid system, this module encodes a Type IV secretion pilus that functions as a molecular syringe, actively pumping copies of pPro-MobV into neighboring recipient bacteria upon cell-to-cell contact.[2]

* CRISPR-Cas9 Homing Cassette: This payload encodes the Cas9 endonuclease, a single guide RNA (sgRNA) targeting the bla beta-lactamase gene (which confers ampicillin resistance), and flanking homology arms matching the DNA sequences immediately adjacent to the target bla locus.[2][5]

When a donor bacterium carrying pPro-MobV conjugates with a recipient cell harboring an ampicillin-resistance plasmid (such as pETas), a prokaryotic mutagenic chain reaction unfolds.[5] Upon entry into the recipient prokaryote, the Cas9-sgRNA ribonucleoprotein complex locates the bla locus on the resident resistance plasmid and introduces a site-specific double-strand break (DSB). Instead of merely degrading the cleaved plasmid, the flanking homology arms on pPro-MobV serve as a repair template for the host cell's homologous recombination machinery. Homology-directed repair (HDR) copies the entire Pro-AG cassette directly into the cleaved bla gene, insertionally inactivating antibiotic resistance while converting the target plasmid into a new Pro-AG factory that synthesizes additional Cas9 and sgRNA.[5]

Experimental Efficacy and the RecA Recombination Paradox

To quantify conversion efficiency, Kaduwal et al. paired E. coli EPI300 donor cells carrying pPro-MobV with ampicillin-resistant E. coli MG1655 recipients across 72-hour conjugation incubations at 30 deg C.[2] The Pro-AG system achieved an approximate 5-log (100,000-fold) reduction in ampicillin-resistant colony-forming units (CFU), outperforming non-homing CRISPR-Cas9 control constructs (which cleave target DNA without homology-directed copying) by roughly 100-fold.[2] Crucially, because conjugative pili actively propagate plasmids across cell-contact networks, pPro-MobV penetrated structured bacterial biofilms -- extracellular polymeric matrices on catheters and industrial surfaces that routinely block the diffusion of conventional small-molecule antibiotics.[1]

Mechanistic dissection revealed an instructive trade-off governed by RecA, the primary bacterial recombinase mediating homologous strand invasion. Comparing wild-type (recA+) recipients against recA- deficient mutants uncovered two distinct modes of resistance suppression:[2]

| Recipient Genetic Background | | Dominant Molecular Pathway | | Plasmid Fate & Population Dynamics | | Relative AMR Suppression |

| Wild-Type (recA+) | | Homology-Directed Repair (HDR) | | Pro-AG cassette copies into target bla locus; preserves plasmid backbone and amplifies self-propagating drive across population | | ~105-fold CFU reduction (100x higher than standard CRISPR cut) |

| Recombinase-Deficient (recA-) | | Exonucleolytic Degradation (RecBCD) | | Cas9 double-strand break cannot recombine; linearized resistance plasmid is destroyed, curing the cell but halting drive amplification | | ~107-fold CFU reduction (~100x greater single-cell clearance than recA+) |

Counterintuitively, immediate depletion of resistant CFUs was approximately 100-fold greater in recA- recipients because unrepaired linear plasmid DNA is rapidly degraded by host exonucleases.[2] However, plasmid destruction terminates the positive feedback loop required for multi-plasmid conversion and secondary conjugal spread. Thus, RecA activity mediates a fundamental operational balance between single-cell plasmid eradication and population-wide gene drive propagation.

Biocontainment Safeguards: Homology-Based Deletion and Phage Chasers

Deploying self-propagating genetic elements into clinical or environmental settings raises stringent biosafety concerns regarding uncontrolled horizontal spread. To render Pro-AG fully reversible, the UCSD team engineered a programmable scrubbing mechanism termed Homology-Based Deletion (HBD).[2] The researchers flanked the entire Pro-AG drive cassette with identical direct repeat sequences -- testing repeat lengths of 75 base pairs and 17 base pairs.[2]

When a secondary guide RNA directs Cas9 to cleave at a target site positioned between these flanking direct repeats, the exposed homologous ends anneal via single-strand annealing (SSA). This recombination excises the entire Pro-AG cassette, leaving behind only a single short repeat scar while keeping the host antibiotic-sensitive.[2] Notably, HBD operates robustly in both recA+ and recA- backgrounds.[2] To trigger this safeguard in complex settings, the authors demonstrated a two-stage protocol using an engineered bacteriophage "chaser" (-DPro-AG phage) that infects treated bacteria and delivers the secondary guide RNA, erasing the synthetic drive elements once AMR neutralization is complete.[2][6]

Clinical and Ecological Applications in Microbiome Engineering

Unlike broad-spectrum antibiotics that indiscriminately devastate commensal gut flora and predispose patients to secondary infections such as Clostridioides difficile, Pro-AG acts as a precision genetic scalpel. By selectively overwriting resistance or virulence genes without lysing host cells, conjugal gene drives can disarm pathogens while preserving the ecological stability of the host microbiome and avoiding the fitness cost and dysbiosis associated with broad chemical bactericidal regimens.[1] Restoring beta-lactam or aminoglycoside sensitivity in situ could also rehabilitate legacy first-line antibiotics whose clinical utility has eroded over decades of overuse, reducing reliance on toxic last-resort antimicrobials such as colistin.

Beyond clinical therapeutics, Pro-AG offers a scalable strategy for environmental remediation in municipal wastewater treatment plants, hospital effluents, and intensive agricultural runoff lagoons -- critical hotspots where evolution and high-density plasmid exchange generate novel superbugs.[2] Introducing donor strains equipped with pPro-MobV into activated sludge matrices or medical device lines could actively scrub mobile resistance reservoirs before effluents enter natural watersheds, while subsequent deployment of the -DPro-AG phage chaser is designed to address regulatory biocontainment requirements overseen by agencies such as the FDA and EPA prior to any future environmental release.[2][6]

Conclusion: Precision Genetic Disarmament in a Post-Antibiotic Era

The 2026 study by Kaduwal, Bier, and Meyer establishes that the machinery of horizontal gene transfer -- long the primary engine of bacterial resistance -- can be inverted to propagate antibiotic susceptibility.[1][2] By coupling a 5-log conjugal conversion drive with a phage-triggered Homology-Based Deletion safety switch, Pro-Active Genetics provides a rigorous, reversible blueprint for erasing antimicrobial resistance across complex microbial communities.

Updates... (Nov 24, 2026): Verified Ref [1] (UC San Diego Today, Feb 6, 2026) resolves cleanly with HTTP 200 following an earlier transient network error flag (#16401), normalized the references heading to References, and upgraded Ref [4] (Kovach et al., Dec 1, 1995) to its exact PubMed publication date, building on the Nov 21, 2026 citation update.

References

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