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The Campaign to End Antibiotic Overuse

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Groups Applaud AMA Action on Antibiotics in Agriculture and Antibiotic Resistance

Health, consumer, and other public interest groups praised the American Medical Association (AMA) for recognizing animal agriculture as a serious factor in the growing public health problem of antibiotic resistance. At its annual meeting in Chicago, the AMA endorsed a resolution opposing the unnecessary use of antibiotics to speed the growth of healthy farm animals and urging that all such agricultural use of antibiotics be terminated or phased out.

"Giving antibiotics that are used in human medicine to healthy animals is a risky practice which puts human health on the line," said David Wallinga, M.D., a physician with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. "Antibiotic resistance has the potential to plunge us back into medicine's Dark Ages when doctors couldn't treat infections caused by bacteria."

"The advent of antibiotic drugs sixty years ago turned bacterial infections into treatable conditions, rather than the life-threatening scourges they once were," said Rebecca Goldberg, Ph.D., Senior Scientist with Environmental Defense. "Today, however, the effectiveness of many life-saving antibiotics is waning, the legacy of years of overuse in both human medicine and agriculture. Health officials in the U.S. are concerned that many strains of bacteria are becoming "superbugs," resistant to more and more antibiotics. Children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems - including chemotherapy, HIV, and transplant patients - are particularly at risk from strains of antibiotic-resistant bacteria," said Goldberg.

While overuse of antibiotics in humans is regarded as an important cause of the decreasing effectiveness of antibiotics, the AMA's resolution specifically acknowledges the role of animal agriculture in this public health crisis. "Although precise data do not now exist, the best available estimates indicate that most antibiotic use in the United States occurs in raising animals for food," said Jane Rissler, Ph.D., Senior Scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists. "About 70% of all antibiotics are used - not to treat sick animals - but to artificially boost weight gain in healthy poultry, hogs, fish, and beef cattle, and to compensate for unsanitary growing conditions, especially on crowded "factory" farms," said Rissler. Most of the agricultural antibiotics also have important uses in people.

"This extensive and unnecessary use drastically shortens the "life span" of an antibiotic, said Tamar Barlam, M.D., of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "Clearly, it is important to extend the lifetime of any drug that is effective against human disease, especially because few new antibiotics will be available in the near future. For some illnesses, doctors now have only one or two drugs of last resort to use against resistant bacterial infections. The AMA's acknowledgement of the role of animal agriculture in this impending crisis is the first step towards ensuring antibiotics work for sick people who need them," said Barlam.

Given the rapid evolution of bacteria, all antibiotics have a limited period of effectiveness. But the more often bacteria are exposed to an antibiotic, the more chances they have to develop resistance against it.

When animals are given antibiotics to artificially boost weight gain and compensate for poor growing conditions, they are given low doses that kill only the most susceptible bacteria and leave the surviving bacteria to pass on their resistant features to succeeding generations.