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February 27, 2004

RE: Lessons from "Mad Cow" - Editorialize supporting bipartisan bill to prevent threats from unwise animal-feed policies.

Dear Editor:

During the past few months, we've seen the disastrous effects on the agriculture industry of the lack of preventative action that led the outbreak of Mad Cow disease in the U.S. While the Food and Drug Administration now has begun to take steps to control the spread of Mad Cow disease, **the outbreak reminds us that what we feed to animals can have dramatic health consequences for consumers.** In the United Kingdom, where feeding ground up cattle parts to cattle first spread Mad Cow disease, 139 people have died as the disease passed from cattle to humans.

But Mad Cow disease is not the only health threat associated with unwise animal-feed policies. Another serious issue is the massive use of medically important antibiotics as feed additives for livestock and poultry. **While the lessons from the Mad Cow issue are still fresh, we urge you to editorialize in favor of bipartisan bills in Congress to phase out the routine feeding to livestock of antibiotics that are important in human medicine.** This unnecessary use of antibiotics promotes development and spread of **antibiotic-resistant bacteria that threaten human health** by making antibiotics less effective in treating potentially deadly illnesses in humans. (Please note that Mad Cow disease is caused by special proteins called prions, *not* by bacteria, and that antibiotics thus cannot be used in treating Mad Cow disease.)

**Thousands of people die annually from antibiotic-resistant infections.** Recently, a federal task force warned that antibiotic resistance is "a growing menace to all people" and concluded that if nothing is done, treatments for common infections will become "increasingly limited and expensive -- and, in some cases, nonexistent." Lack of effective antibiotics to treat infections poses a threat to every American. People with weakened immune systems are at particular risk, including young children, senior citizens, diabetics, cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, and transplant patients.

**Scientific research confirms that antibiotic use in farm animals creates resistant bacteria that can reach people via food and the environment.** Bacteria become resistant to antibiotics in part because of the overuse of those antibiotics both in human medicine and in animal agriculture, a lesser-known but significant cause as well. As the U.S. Institute of Medicine has noted, "a decrease in antimicrobial [antibiotics and related drugs] use in human medicine alone will have little effect on the current [antibiotic-resistance] situation. Substantial efforts must be made to decrease inappropriate overuse in animals and agriculture as well." That's why the American Medical Association as well as over 300 health, environmental, sustainable agriculture, and other group support this common sense legislation, "The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act" (S. 1460/H.R./ H.R. 2932).

**Other nations have proven use of antibiotic feed additives can be eliminated without hurting animals or profits.** Denmark, the world's largest pork exporter, banned the use of antibiotics as feed additives after the country's leading television network aired an expose about it called "A Pig of a Medicine." Last year, the World Health Organization released an international study documenting Denmark's success in phasing out antibiotic feed additives, resulting in a 54% decrease in antibiotic use and dramatically reducing levels of resistant bacteria in agricultural animals.

The Union of Concerned Scientists estimates that **70 percent of the antibiotics used in the U.S. each year are routinely fed to poultry, pork and beef cattle** - not to treat disease, but rather to promote slightly faster growth and compensate for unsanitary conditions at factory farms. Over half of those antibiotics are identical or similar to antibiotics used in human medicine. Antibiotic feed additives require no prescription or veterinary supervision.

According to the National Academy of Sciences, **antibiotic-resistant bacteria add \$4-5 billion to health care costs in the U.S. each year.** In stark contrast, the NAS estimates that a ban on all antibiotics feed additives (not just medically important ones) would raise meat prices by less than \$5 to \$10 per person annually. The Senate version of "The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act" authorizes funding for farmers to help defray costs of phasing out non-therapeutic use of medically important antibiotics, and provides for research and demonstration projects to assist farmers in this transition.

Clearly, it is time to end the use of medically important antibiotics as feed additives for poultry, beef cattle, and swine that are not even sick. **Congress must do everything it can to protect our dwindling arsenal of effective antibiotics**, including passing "The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act."

**As a result of Mad Cow, Congress should be responsive to common sense food safety measures, but the window of opportunity soon may fade** when the next political crisis emerges, so we urge you to editorialize in favor of this legislation as soon as possible.

If you would like to interview a doctor or scientist from the Keep Antibiotics Working campaign ([www.KeepAntibioticsWorking.com](http://www.KeepAntibioticsWorking.com)) about this issue, please contact me at 202-478-6128 or [scrowley@mrss.com](mailto:scrowley@mrss.com).

Sincerely,

Sean Crowley

*Keep Antibiotics Working: The Campaign to End Antibiotics Overuse, is a coalition of health, consumer, agricultural, environmental, humane and other advocacy groups with more than nine million members dedicated to eliminating a major cause of antibiotic resistance: the inappropriate use of antibiotics in food animals.*