

Safeguarding the Effectiveness of Existing Antibiotics is Essential

Dear President Bush:

As physicians and scientists, we are deeply concerned about the declining effectiveness of antibiotics against common bacterial infections. This decline is speeded by overuse of these precious medicines – overuse not just in clinical medicine, but also in agriculture, where antibiotics are routinely added to feed for hogs, cattle, chickens and other food animals.

Antibiotics were one of the most important public health advances of the 20th century. During the Second World War, penicillin revolutionized care of our wounded soldiers in the field. Unfortunately, penicillin is no longer the wonder drug it once was, as disease-causing bacteria have grown increasingly resistant to it. A similar fate has befallen tetracycline, erythromycin, and many other antibiotics. The result is a looming medical crisis in which bacterial infections are becoming more difficult and even impossible to control with current drugs. Unfortunately, we cannot count on new antibiotics to end this crisis; *only a single new class of antibiotics has been developed in the past 25 years.*

Overuse of antibiotics in human medicine is a major contributor to bacterial resistance. But their overuse in agriculture also demands action. *Some estimates indicate that the majority of the antibiotics used in this country are fed to farm animals that are not sick. Rather, animals are fed antibiotics to increase their rate of growth and to inhibit disease under crowded and often unsanitary farm conditions.* Many of these antibiotics are identical or closely related to the drugs that people rely on. Some bacteria that become antibiotic resistant in farm animals, such as salmonella, can then cause hard-to-treat infections in humans. There is strong scientific evidence that the overuse of antibiotics in animal agriculture threatens their effectiveness in human medicine.

Senators Snowe and Kennedy and Representatives Brown and Gilchrest have introduced the "Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act," (S.1460/H.R.2932) which would phase out the routine use of medically important classes of antibiotics in animals, helping to protect these vitally important drugs. Some U.S. and a number of foreign producers have already successfully removed such antibiotics in animal production, demonstrating that a phase out is practical. Further research on production methods will undoubtedly make the transition even easier.

If we fail to curb overuse of antibiotics, we risk a return to the days when common bacteria routinely claimed the lives of many people. Young children, the elderly, and surgical, chemotherapy and transplant patients are among those most at risk. Your leadership now in improving antibiotic use in people and animals can help protect the health of all Americans for years to come.

Yours Truly,

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