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PRESS RELEASE

Media Contact: Bob Liff at 917-287-7089 or bliff@mrss.com

OVERUSE OF ANTIBIOTICS ON THE FARM AND THE EFFECT ON HUMAN HEALTH HIGHLIGHT INFORMATIONAL BRIEFINGS IN SENATE, HOUSE

SEN. TOM HARKIN, REPS. LOUISE SLAUGHTER AND JAN SCHAKOWSY HONORARY HOSTS OF BRIEFINGS ON DEVELOPMENT OF ANTIBIOTIC-RESISTANT MICROBES IN ANIMALS AND HUMANS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ***APRIL 15, 2010***

Infectious disease doctors, public health experts and scientific researchers met with Congressional leaders and staff on Wednesday to describe how the routine non-therapeutic use of human antibiotics in the food and water of livestock results in antibiotic-resistant diseases in humans that cause extended hospital stays and increase health care costs.

The experts, speaking at informational briefings on both sides of Capitol Hill, described how extensive antibiotic use has created a public health crisis, and they identified the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act (PAMTA) as a way for Congress to address this crisis. PAMTA would require that drugs important for treating diseases in humans be shown to be safe with respect to antibiotic-resistance if they are to continue to be used by meat producers in animal feed and water for growth promotion or routine disease prevention.

Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY), the lone microbiologist in Congress, is the lead sponsor of PAMTA in the House where more than 100 members have expressed support. The late Sen. Edward Kennedy was the prime sponsor in the Senate, a leadership role now taken by Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-CA).

Dr. Margaret Mellon, Director of the Food and Environment Program for the Union of Concerned Scientists, pointed out that as much as 70 percent of antibiotics – developed in the years after World War II for treatment of human diseases – now go into animal feed. Extensive evidence shows that this enormous use of antibiotics leads to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria in cattle, pigs and chickens fed the drugs, and that the resistant bacteria on the animals can find their way to humans, often on food.

Dr. Lance Price, a microbiologist specializing in bacterial genetics, explained antibiotic-resistance and the role of antibiotic use in the spread of resistance. Whenever antibiotics are used there is the chance that some of the bacteria exposed to them will not be affected. These bacteria that are not affected are called antibiotic-resistant bacteria. As antibiotics are used more frequently, the number of bacteria that are resistant increases. Infections caused by antibiotic-resistant bacteria are more difficult to treat.

While doctors are taking action to reduce the spread of resistance from human use of the drugs, they oppose the routine use of important human drugs in animal feed because they see the problems that resistance can cause for human health, and they understand the role drug use plays in spreading resistance. Drug use on the farm has long been known to lead to high levels of resistance in foodborne pathogens such as *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. This is particularly true for antibiotics such as penicillin that have been used on farm for decades.

The panelists discussed the emergence of a new strain of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) in both humans and hogs which poses risks to U.S. hog farmers, their communities, and the public at-large.

Maryn McKenna, author of the recently-published "Superbug: The Fatal Menace of MRSA", joined the panel to discuss MRSA, a serious pathogen once found primarily in hospitals, that has recently shown up in a new form linked to animal production. Research in Iowa found high levels of MRSA on hog farms both among the animals and the workers who oversee them. The livestock associated strain of MRSA has been shown to cause serious illness in humans including at least one case of necrotizing fasciitis also known as flesh eating bacteria. Recalling how a slow response to the rise of community acquired MRSA in the 1950's let it become a major health threat; she called for immediate and complete surveillance of this new strain.

Dr. David Wallinga, the Physician-Director of Food and Health Programs at the Institute for Agricultural and Trade Policy, also discussed the health-based trade implications of the routine non-therapeutic use of antibiotics. Many of U.S. partners in trade, who also compete in terms of meat production, do not allow antibiotics in animal feed to be used as freely as in the U.S. This creates a real risk that the U.S. may lose future access to growing markets because of consumer concern about the safety of U.S. meat linked to antibiotic-resistance and the use of drugs for non-therapeutic purposes.

Dr. James Johnson, an infectious diseases expert at the VA Medical Center-Minneapolis and Professor of Medicine at the University of Minnesota, told people at the Capitol Hill briefings that the future effectiveness of antibiotics in fighting human diseases is at stake.

"Prior generations gave us the gift of antibiotics," Johnson said. "Today we have a moral obligation to ensure this global treasure is available for our children and future generations."

Experts at the Capitol Hill briefings agreed that antibiotic resistance is a public health crisis that will only worsen if we don't act now. In addition to meeting with members of Congress, they have also been met with officials at the Food and Drug Administration, urging that they take action to protect the public from antibiotic-resistant bacteria linked to livestock drug use.

Keep Antibiotics Working (KAW) is a coalition of health, consumer, agricultural, environmental, humane, and other advocacy groups, with more than eleven million supporters, dedicated to the preservation of antibiotics for use in human and animal medicine.

PO Box 14590 • Chicago, IL 60614-0590
PHONE: 773-525-4952 • FAX: 773-525-5226 • E-MAIL: information@KeepAntibioticsWorking.com