

CAN WE GET THE ANTIBIOTICS OUT OF THE MEAT INDUSTRY?¹

Eric Steinman[©]

I have a distinct memory from a few years back, when anti-bacterial soap and the like first became popularized, involving the Utopian promise of wiping out all bacteria (good and bad) from hands, feet, countertops, etc. While this promise of a cleaner and more sanitary world had its appeal, I (along with a few other wary skeptics) wondered if the eradication of all bacteria was such a good idea; that maybe this pathogen-free promise was going to bring along unforeseen problems. Well, we have yet to see the result of our anti-bacterial boon, but in the fight against disease and pathogens with the use of antibiotics, we humans have seen spotted trouble on the horizon – especially in relation to factory farm-raised livestock.

As a brief primer to the whole issue of livestock (or animals as some of us tend to overlook) and antibiotics: industrial farms throughout the United States have been mixing antibiotics into livestock feed since 1946, when studies showed that the drugs cause animals to grow faster and put on weight more efficiently, increasing meat producers' profits. The primary reason that animals are fed antibiotics is because they are fed a low cost, high calorie corn-based diet. This is also the reason the livestock tend to gain weight so quickly (as much as 70 percent of all antibiotics used in the United States is fed to healthy farm animals). Add to this the close confinement these animals are kept in, as well as the stress and lack of sanitation that many of these animals contend with, it is no wonder that they become prone to infection and in desperate need of antibiotic treatment in order to stay alive for as long as necessary.

But the liberal use of antibiotics presents more complex and knotty challenges than just ethical ones. According to a New York Times report, dispensing antibiotics to healthy animals is routine on the large, concentrated farms that now dominate American agriculture. But the practice is increasingly condemned by medical experts who say it contributes to a growing scourge of modern medicine: the emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, including dangerous *E. coli* strains that account for millions of bladder infections each year, as well as resistant types of salmonella and other microbes. It has been estimated that at least 18,000 Americans die every year from such drug-resistant infections, many of which are attributed to liberal antibiotic use.

Now, contributing to what may be a banner year for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the FDA intends to put its proverbial food down with new tighter guidelines that would effectively end farm use of these antibiotic drugs simply to promote faster animal growth. In addition, the FDA is calling for tighter oversight by veterinarians in an effort to reduce what it calls a clear risk to human health. All of this FDA movement comes at a time when vocal criticism of factory farms and animal confinement has reached a fever pitch, and will undoubtedly be a welcome relief to the long established status quo. However, not everyone is looking forward to these tighter regulations, namely livestock producers who don't see the direct connection between factory farms, antibiotic resistant bacteria, and outbreaks of human illness. In addition, many in the factory farm business argue that more stringent guidelines on antibiotic use would lead to more animal fatalities and ultimately a more costly end product. However, the EU barred most nontreatment uses of antibiotics back in 2006 and farmers there have adapted without major costs. And it has been proven over the years, in many different locals with

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sustainable farms, that animals raised in a clean, natural environment that is not a breeding ground for bacteria actually do better than their antibiotic-treated counterparts.

It is too early to see how all of this shakes out, but in a year where progressive legislation has been authored to reform egg farms, and a general growing awareness of the shortfalls of the factory farm model, it feels like a move in the right direction, especially after the FDA's relative inaction over the past decade. I would imagine that many of you have strong feelings about the current status of factory farms and their liberal use of antibiotics. I don't even feel I need ask pointed questions, as many of you will happily sound off without provocation below. But please, I invite everyone to share your take on the current state of being and what is needed for a happier, healthier, and maybe more ethical food system.