Let's Not Overreact to the Threat of Bioterrorism

By ACSH Staff — October 29, 2001

To the Editor:

In regard to Dr. Scott Gottlieb's Oct. 19th editorial-page piece "Ammo for the War on Germs" some of his ideas are misleading:

Procuring Cipro, or other antibiotics, as a security blanket against bioterrorism, leads the public to a false sense of security, as well as being a danger to public health. The urge to pop a few pills when a cough or flu-like illness develops and these are bound to occur will be irresistible to many. The inevitable result: completely unnecessary drug side-effects, ranging from minor annoyances (such as headache and nausea) to life-threatening allergic reactions. Children and fetuses are particularly prone to joint and ligament damage from Cipro-type drugs.

The overgrowth of antibiotic-resistant germs, whose appearance has severely compromised treatment of many infections in our most seriously ill patients, will expand into a problem dwarfing the current "epidemic" of anthrax. Physicians' concern over this emanates from a valid, scientific not "weird" sense of communal responsibility. We already have too many patients suffering from hospital-acquired, drug-resistant infections.

As for smallpox, it is caused by a virus insensitive to all our antibiotics; thus, there are no drugs to "stash away" to soothe our inflamed psyches. Its mortality has been described in the medical literature as 30%, not 60%.