Get the bugs out of our food, says Ruth Reichl

By ACSH Staff — July 31, 2014

No, the bugs she’s talking about are not roaches, crickets, etc., not at all they’re antibiotic-resistant bacteria that can cause serious illnesses in people.

In a hard-hitting op-ed in today’s NY Times, food writer Ruth Reichl takes the FDA to task for not taking strong action to limit or ban the use of antibiotics in food animals. Meat and poultry producers are known to use low levels of antibiotics in animal feed to promote faster growth. The concern is that traces of antibiotics can result in bacteria that evolve resistance against these drugs, and if such bugs are passed along to humans a serious antibiotic-resistant illness can develop.

As we’ve noted in the past, antibiotic resistance is a growing problem, and pharmaceutical companies have not been able to keep pace. Partly that’s because of the disincentives they face in the drug development process, as well as prescription of these drugs for illnesses they can’t cure (e.g. viruses). But many have expressed concern that the widespread practice of feeding low levels of the drugs to animals contributes to the problem. Ms Reichl quotes CDC director Dr. Thomas R. Frieden: If we don’t act now, our medicine cabinet will be empty and we won’t have the antibiotics we need to save lives.

ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava is also concerned about this issue: We don’t know the extent to which antibiotic use in food animals contributes to the problem of antibiotic resistant drugs in human illness. But we do know, as Ms Reichl points out, some producers in this country also avoid using antibiotics unless animals are sick. At this point, when antibiotic-resistance is a growing problem, it behooves us to take all possible actions to counteract it, by providing incentives for new drug research as well as by stricter regulations for the use of drugs that are also used by humans. And of course, physicians should be urged to use antibiotics only when they are truly appropriate.