The growing antibiotic crisis: Much talk, little action

By ACSH Staff — April 30, 2015

There are two items in today s news that address the 800 pound staph infection in the room.

As we have been saying for years, while people worry about silly nonsense like artificial sweeteners, trace chemicals on cash register receipts, and cosmetics, there is a real and growing threat right at our doorstep the continued emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. THIS is something that is truly frightening, and something people should worry about not traces of arsenic in apple juice that Dr Oz used to scare the hell out of mothers in 2012. (Oh, he happened to be incorrect, but that never stopped him before or since.)

The World Health Organization just issued a statement warning us that the world is failing miserably to adequately fight antibiotic resistance. Although the group does a very fine job in pointing out the consequences of this impending catastrophe, it fails to offer much in the way of a solution.

For example, Keiji Fukuda, the WHO's assistant director general for health security said, Bacteria that are progressively less treatable by available antibiotics [t]his is happening in all parts of the world, so all countries must do their part to tackle this global threat.

This statement is a follow up to a very blunt warning from 2014, at which time the organization predicted that ...without significant action the world would be headed for a post-antibiotic era. And, in such an era, "Common infections and minor injuries that have been treatable for decades, may once again kill. We will lose the ability to treat a range of serious conditions such as bloodstream infections, pneumonia, tuberculosis [t]

Unfortunately, tackling this problem is much easier said than done.

For example, the WHO recommends:

- Increased vigilance for counterfeit antibiotics, since they can be less potent or impure. (Treating an infection with a suboptimal dose of an antibiotic contributes to resistance.)
- Preventing misuse, such as emphasizing that viral infections cannot be fought with antibiotics
- The lack of uniform global standards for use of the drugs
- The lack of proper surveillance of resistance
Hopefully, the WHO will have some practical suggestions when it issues a plan next month at its annual meeting in Geneva.

In the US, a small but significant step has been taken by Tyson Foods one of the main suppliers of chicken in the US. The company announced that by 2017 it would eliminate the use of human antibiotics in broiler chickens.

The move is largely ceremonial, since the company has already cut this practice by 80 percent since 2011.

According to president and chief executive Donnie Smith, "Antibiotic-resistant infections are a global health concern. We're confident our meat and poultry products are safe, but want to do our part to responsibly reduce human antibiotics on the farm so these medicines can continue working when they're needed to treat illness."

ACSH advisor and world renowned antibiotic expert Dr. David Shlaes believes this is fine, but too late. In his blog Antibiotics-The Perfect Storm, Shlaes discusses how we are well behind Europe in removing antibiotics from livestock feed.

In his April 14th blog, Shlaes says, The FDA just published a study showing large increase in antibiotic use on US farms but they don't know how or why the antibiotics are used. They have issued guidelines that ask industry to voluntarily withdraw growth promotion from labels for animal antibiotics but they refuse to simply ban such use for reasons that are unclear.

He compares our efforts in this area to those in Europe: Europe not only has instituted such a ban but does a remarkable job of following antibiotic use in animals.

Why is the US failing to properly prioritize this crucial issue? Unfortunately, politics typically the worst enemy of science.

- Antibiotic resistance is not a priority for the next President.
- Antibiotic resistance is not viewed as a priority for voters.
- The candidates do not view antibiotic resistance as an important public health threat.
- The candidates desire to distance themselves from President Obama is greater than their desire to support or expand upon his programs.

ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom, who formerly worked with Dr. Shlaes in this area says, It can't be a surprise to anyone with a pulse that a politician will do or say just about anything to get elected. The American public does not want to hear about Carbapenem-resistant enterobacteriaceae (CRE) an especially deadly, highly resistant infection that kills 50 percent of those who become infected with it, so candidates will not mention it.

He continues, There is plenty of other blame to go around. The anti pharmaceutical mindset is so prevalent in this country, that I have no doubt some people think that this is simply a manufactured crisis created by greedy pharma to put profits over people. Well, this mindset, which is certainly shaped by alternative medicine gurus, and outspoken supplement hucksters like Mike Adams and Joe Mercola will eventually come back and bite them hard once their kids start dying from formerly
treatable infections. This is a lesson that no one wants to learn. It will be truly disgraceful if it takes such tragedies to teach people what they should have already known.

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