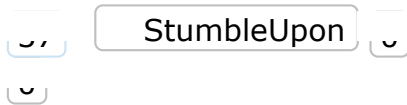


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FDA's Step to Limit Animal Antibiotics Symbolic-Animal Husbandry Issues Must Still be Addressed

By [Ralph Loglisci](#) on [December 13, 2013](#)



In [1977](#), the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) let everyone know that there was strong evidence that the use of penicillin and tetracycline for anything other than treating disease in livestock, could lead to the development of super bugs strong enough to render the powerful antibiotics useless in people. That warning sparked a ferocious backlash from the powerful animal agriculture industry, which to this day still depends on feeding animals low doses of antibiotics to help grow them faster and compensate for crowded

unsanitary living conditions.

Now, nearly 40 years later the embattled agency has finally mustered the courage to approve a strongly worded [recommendation](#) for producers to stop using medically important antibiotics as growth promoters and to give veterinarians oversight over therapeutic uses of the life-saving drugs.

But perhaps FDA's announcement isn't so brave after all. The same animal agriculture groups that so loudly protested FDA's stance on antibiotic use for decades [came out in support of the guidance](#) Wednesday afternoon. Many of these groups, which ranged from the Pork Producers and National Chicken Councils to animal drug makers owned by Eli Lilly and Pfizer and the industry friendly American Veterinary Medical Association, worked closely with the FDA to draft the guidelines.

Not surprisingly, the recommendations do little to address the reasons why industrial-scale farms rely so heavily on antibiotics. Instead, they've come up with a complicated voluntary process that may in the end do little to save the effectiveness of antibiotics for both people and animals.

The Animal Health Institute (AHI), a lobbying group for the animal drug industry, joined the National Pork Producers Council and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) in a news conference Wednesday to describe how the FDA recommendations are expected to impact the way antibiotics are used on the farm.

Dr. Liz Wagstrom, the Pork Producers Chief Veterinarian, very carefully stated that the guidance will ensure that farmers will not be able to use antibiotics deemed medically important to people as growth promoters. However, that does not mean farmers will not be able to use other antibiotics for growth promotion. Additionally, the guidance would still allow farmers to use medically important antibiotics for so-called disease control, prevention, and treatment.

Forgive me for questioning these industry representatives' motives for supporting the current FDA recommendations. For years the very same people have been denying that the use of antibiotics in animals pose any medical risks for people. While serving as the communications director for the [Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production](#) (PCIFAP) my colleagues and I met in 2006 with members of each of the groups represented at yesterday's news conference. Back then, not one would admit that the use of antibiotics in food animals posed any risk to the general public.

In 2009, the very same group signed onto a [letter](#) submitted to the White House by the American Feed Industry Association, which claimed, "... no conclusive scientific studies have been offered demonstrating the use of antibiotics on farms contributes significantly to an increase in human resistance."

The PCIFAP Commissioners came to a much different conclusion and [recommended](#) that the evidence is so overwhelming and the risk is so great that farmers should ban the non-therapeutic use of all antibiotics and other antimicrobials in food animal production. The Commission defined non-therapeutic as any use absent of clinical disease or documented disease exposure.

While their rhetoric has changed slightly, I doubt that industry leaders believe the risks are any greater now. For the record, many studies have directly linked animal-use to antibiotics resistance in people. Just this fall, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health scientists published a [study](#), which found an association between living near large animal production facilities and community-acquired infections with MRSA.

If industry does not truly believe there is a problem with using antibiotics, I doubt their support of the spirit of the guidance to reduce the risk of antibiotic resistance is sincere. Their goal, as far back as 2006, is to convince everyone that their generous low-dose prophylactic use of antibiotics is for disease prevention and if the animals grow faster, so be it. They conveniently ignore the fact that it is the low-dose usage that leads to the development of resistant bacteria.

Antibiotic resistance among people is reaching a crisis level. More people die of resistant bacterial infections in the United States than those with HIV/AIDS. Johns Hopkins [Center for a Livable Future](#) (CLF), fears the FDA guidelines, “will likely fail to change how these drugs are used in food animals and will not stem the public health crisis of increasing antibiotic resistance.”

CLF scientist Keeve Nachman says, “The FDA may care whether companies call it growth promotion or disease prevention, but the bacteria do not. If antibiotics are used in the same ways, they will have the same effects.”

The amount of antibiotics used in animal agriculture is astounding. It wasn't until a few years ago that we were able to confirm that nearly [80 percent of all antibiotics](#) sold in the U.S. are reserved for animal use. Perhaps the most telling sign that the guidance may have minimal impact was the response to Politico reporter Helena Bottemiller Evich's question at the news conference as to whether the guidance will help reduce the total amount of antibiotics used on the farm.

AHI's Vice President Dr. Richard Carnevale responded, “We don't have any real way to know whether this is going to impact total use, because there are so many factors that are involved with antibiotic use. If there is a change we probably won't know for quite some time.”

Dr. Raymond Tarpley, a large animal veterinarian, retired Texas A&M professor, and critic of the industry's stance on the use of antibiotics in food animals, fears the current guidance will simply provide, “a back door through which the growth promotion effects can still be exploited under another name, thereby incentivizing industry to secure the needed prescriptions and essentially continue business as usual.”

Tarpley says, “to truly deal with antibiotics, we are going to have to find innovative ways to reconfigure the production environment on animal farms that are grounded in sound husbandry principles and obviate the need for low-dose antibiotics in any form.”

Industry groups against increased regulation of antibiotics on the farm, such as the AVMA, point to Denmark, where a sub-therapeutic antibiotics ban enacted more than a decade ago initially led to increased mortality of weaner piglets. What they fail to mention or ignore is that a simple change in animal care protocols fixed the problem relatively quickly.

In fact, Robert Martin, CLF's Director of Food System Policy, says the Danish experience not only led to increased pork production, it cut producers' need for antibiotics in half. Martin says improved production practices included, “allowing the weaners to stay with their mothers longer to help increase immunity, giving the sows more space and bedding, better ventilation in the barns, and more frequent cleaning.”

Tarpley says, “If you address animal welfare and take care of the animals properly so that natural behaviors are accommodated as possible, you'll decrease stress.” He says it is stress that can severely suppress an animal's immune system and leave them susceptible to infections: “The stress thing is a real big point. If you

de-stress an animal it's going to have an immune system that is not going to require the crutch of the antibiotics.”

While researching this story, I came across an [FDA Question & Answer](#) Web page, which addresses its strategy on antimicrobial resistance. One of its theoretical examples of a potentially acceptable prevention use of an antibiotic absent of disease involved, “weaned beef calves arriving at a feedlot in bad weather after a lengthy transport.”

The FDA says these animals may be at risk of developing bacterial respiratory infections and a veterinarian familiar with her client's history and practices may want to administer antibiotics. It seems the FDA ignored one important question, and that's whether the best way to eliminate the need for those antibiotics is to recommend the weaned calves not be transported to a feedlot at all.

I caught up with Bill Niman, cattle rancher and former commissioner for the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, by phone yesterday while he was out on his Bolinas, California ranch tending to a calf to find out what he thought. Bill and his wife, Nicolette Niman, author of [Righteous Pork Chop](#), run [BN Ranch](#) together raising grass fed cattle and heritage turkeys.

Niman says a big issue with the industry is that they are sending younger cattle to feed lots before they've developed a strong enough immune system. He thought the veterinarian would be right in treating the animals, but if she had advised her client to wean the calves at least 45 days prior to leaving the ranch they were born on, she wouldn't have to face that decision. “So basically people who are not doing things correctly need to use antibiotics prophylactically to replace good animal husbandry,” Niman says.

In regards to the new FDA guidance, Niman says, “What worries me about this is that people in public will think, well it's been dealt with, we don't have to talk or think about it anymore. And basically it hasn't been dealt with.”

I agree. I also recognize that for FDA this is a significant first step in ending the improper use of antibiotics in food animals. However, if FDA and the animal agriculture industry wanted to take bold effective steps in eliminating the risk of developing antibiotic resistant bacteria on the farm and protecting the efficacy of antibiotics for people they would simply end all low-dose usage, with rare exceptions.

The best way to make this possible in industrial-scale facilities is to call for new standards in good animal husbandry that allows animals to exhibit natural behaviors and develop strong immune systems, which limit their susceptibility to bacterial infections.

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