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COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

MAJORITY (202) 225-2927
FACSIMILE (202) 225-2525
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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce Antibiotic Resistance and the Threat to Public Health Subcommittee on Health April 28, 2010

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing on one of the most pressing public health issues we face today – the rising tide of antibiotic resistance.

From hospitals at home to battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans are more vulnerable than ever to infection because of the growing resistance to critical antibiotics.

Antibiotics irrevocably changed public health for the better.

From the discovery of penicillin in 1927 by Dr. Alexander Fleming, antibiotics forged a revolution in public health.

Before we had antibiotics, common skin infections could turn fatal. Childbirth could be a death sentence for both mother and baby. And a superficial wound could deteriorate rapidly, often resulting in amputation.

Antibiotics changed all that. With the discovery of these medicines, doctors could readily treat infection and literally, save lives. The modern age of medicine was launched.

Some 80 years later, this medical miracle is still saving lives. Without antibiotics, many of today's cancer protocols would be nearly impossible to use – patients whose immune systems are severely compromised by the treatments would quickly die from opportunistic infections without these medications. Tuberculosis and other respiratory infections would be killing young and old alike. And surgeries that are now commonplace – procedures such as hip replacements or angioplasty – would be much more dangerous because of the possibility of the development of an untreatable infection. In brief, we cannot do 21st century medicine without antibiotics as an effective component within our collective medical toolkit.

Shockingly, experts tell us we are on the precipice of losing the power of many of today's antibiotics. As greater numbers of bacteria become more resistant to them – for reasons we will explore this afternoon – antibiotics, in turn, become less effective, making infection far more hazardous to health. Indeed, public health officials are increasingly warning that the escalation in antibiotic resistance is threatening to return us to the days before Dr. Fleming's discovery.

This is not exaggeration or hyperbole – or even the stuff of some hypothetical computer model. Too many Americans have already succumbed to our inability to treat infections. The numbers are staggering:

- Over 90,000 Americans die each year of deadly hospital-acquired infections, which are predominantly caused by antibiotic resistant bugs.
- Over 18,000 Americans, including healthy young people, die annually of methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, also known as MRSA.
- We've seen soldiers defeat deadly enemies in Iraq, only to return home with an epidemic of deadly antibiotic-resistant acinetobacter, an infection that is extraordinarily difficult to remedy.

Today, we will learn about the impact of antibiotic resistance on human health from two of the nation's leading experts on infectious diseases: Dr. Tom Frieden, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at NIH.

As we do, I hope we can start to understand and appreciate the severity of the problem we face and together, work toward a public-private plan of attack. Because the status quo simply cannot be an option. To accept that as our standard of care would risk setting American medicine back to a time long gone. Instead, it will take a strong, multi-faceted, yet coordinated strategy to get the job done. I hope today's hearing will begin to set us on that path.

I consider this to be one of the most important public health issues we confront today.

I thank the witnesses for coming today and look forward to their testimony.