

ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce
“Antibiotic Resistance and the Use of Antibiotics in Animal Agriculture”
Subcommittee on Health
July 14, 2010

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding today’s hearing, the third in the Subcommittee’s series to examine the growing and serious problem of antibiotic resistance.

Our first hearings provided the context for understanding the nature of the problem – the scope, the statistics, and the science that make up this emerging public health crisis.

The focus of today’s hearing – the use of antibiotics in animals – is an issue that has been raised by numerous Members of the Subcommittee as well many of our previous witnesses, representing both the public and private sectors. I think we would all agree that the topic is complicated and controversial.

I believe we would also all agree on this point: By definition, antibiotic resistance is bred by the very use of antibiotics, be it by humans or by animals. To remain effective, then, antibiotics must be used judiciously.

As we learned at our last hearing, antibiotics are being overprescribed for use in humans. That is a very real and difficult problem and one that requires our full and immediate attention.

But the issue with animals is something else. For animals, we use antibiotics for purposes other than treating disease.

As we will hear today, animals raised for food production are routinely provided antibiotics to prevent infections. In stark contrast to animals, we would be shocked if a pediatrician ever ordered antibiotics for an entire nursery school class to keep the children from being infected with strep throat. But in this country, that is standard practice for a barnyard full of pigs, or cows, or chickens. In addition, animals regularly are fed these drugs – not to treat any illness at all – but simply to promote growth. In both situations, this is “overprescribing” of a very different sort.

There appears to be universal agreement on yet another point: The key to reducing antibiotic resistance is to reduce the use of antibiotics.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently announced one approach for achieving this goal with respect to animals. In June, the agency issued draft guidance which recommends that antibiotics not be given to animals to promote growth and that when these drugs are used, they should be administered only under the supervision of a veterinarian. This is a good first step.

But we must do more to tackle this piece of the antibiotic resistance puzzle. And we must do so as part of a comprehensive strategy designed to safeguard the vitally important public health tool that is our antibiotics.

It is critical that we encourage the development of new drugs. But it also essential to preserve the antibiotics we already have. That means we must move expeditiously to slow the advancement of antibiotic resistance in both humans and animals.

In each instance, our strategy must be based on science. And the scientific evidence is now strong enough to create consensus among major public health groups and experts around the world that the time has come to reduce the use of antibiotics in animals. Organizations as diverse as the American Medical Association, the Institute of Medicine, the World Health Organization, and as we will hear from both CDC and the FDA, all agree: We must take action now.

Which brings us to today's hearing. We will have before us authorities from all sides of the antibiotics in animals debate – government officials, professionals in human and animal medicine, public health experts, drug industry representatives, and researchers. I encourage all Subcommittee members to join in sorting through the many views we will listen to today to see if we can identify an appropriate science-based policy to include as part of a comprehensive plan for addressing this rising public health emergency.

Let me thank all of our witnesses in advance of their testimony for their participation in today's hearing. We very much appreciate your time and interest and look forward to hearing from you.