

## Helping or Hurting?

**FRANKENSTEIN, Missouri.** The mystery began the day farmer Russ Kremer's knee was slashed by a boar with a razor-sharp tusk. The Missouri pig farmer shrugged off the wound and went back to work. Later, his leg became inflamed and ballooned to twice its size. He had contracted an infection that threatened his life—and baffled doctors who wondered why two months of treatment with multiple antibiotics<sup>1</sup> had done little to ease the condition. The answer was flowing in the veins of the boar: Kremer had fed the animal slop laced with low doses of an antibiotic, spawning a germ that was resistant to drugs. That drug-resistant germ had passed to Kremer.

More and more Americans—many of them living far from barns and pastures—are at risk from the widespread practice of feeding antibiotics to pigs and other livestock such as cows and chickens. Now, a flurry of new research associates antibiotic use in animals with drug resistance in people. Some lawmakers are proposing new laws aimed at banning farmers from administering<sup>2</sup> the drugs to healthy livestock. Many people in the agricultural and pharmaceutical<sup>3</sup> industries, however, are devoting large sums of money to defeating the bills.

### Why Use Antibiotics?

America's farmers are using increasing amounts of antibiotics—about 8 percent more every year. The drugs are usually used to treat infections in livestock. However, 13 percent of antibiotics administered on farms in 2008 were fed to animals that were perfectly healthy. Farmers and pharmaceutical companies claim the drugs are used not only to kill germs. They also accelerate growth, reducing feed expenses by as much as 30 percent. This keeps meat costs low for consumers.

### More Sickness

While antibiotics may be beneficial to people's budgets, they're potentially harmful to the people themselves. According to researchers, animals that are given antibiotics frequently develop drug-resistant germs. These germs can spread to farm workers with cuts or scrapes. They can also spread to consumers who eat the meat.

"Antibiotic-resistant microorganisms<sup>4</sup> generated in the guts of [livestock] don't stay on the farm," said Margaret Mellon. Mellon is the food and environment director of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The increased use of antibiotics in livestock has scientists worried, and not only because animal infections can spread to humans. Some people who regularly eat meat laced with antibiotics develop resistance, so the drugs are less effective when they are administered to treat infections. As a result, deadly diseases are resurging<sup>5</sup> in new and more fatal forms. In fact, the overuse of antibiotics in livestock (and humans), researchers say, has led to a

plague of drug-resistant infections. These infections killed more than 65,000 people in the U.S. in 2008.

## New Laws?

In response to the alarming research, some U.S. lawmakers have proposed new laws aimed at restricting the use of antibiotics on farms. One bill was proposed by New York Representative Louise M. Slaughter. It would halt the use of the drugs on livestock unless the animals are sick.

"If you mixed an antibiotic in your [already healthy] child's cereal, people would think you're crazy," said Slaughter.

Farmers and drug makers, concerned about the economic effects of such laws, are battling back. In 2009 alone, pharmaceutical companies spent at least \$135 million lobbying against bills aimed at limiting the use of antibiotics on farms. In addition, agriculture-related companies devoted \$70 million to a host of issues that included fighting the proposed new laws. The groups emphasize that their meat products pose no threat to humans.

"The product that we produce today is the safest, most wholesome product that you could possibly get," said farmer Craig Rowles. Rowles himself consumes meat from livestock that had consumed antibiotics.

The groups' previous efforts to fight such laws proved successful. In 2008, for example, the government attempted to restrict a particular livestock antibiotic. The decision was reversed after officials received hundreds of letters from drug companies and farm animal trade groups.

Recently, however, U.S. trade groups have faced increased pressure to make changes. This pressure comes from other countries that have already adopted strict limits on the use of antibiotics on farms. Some of these countries are banning meat imports from the U.S.

Back in Missouri, the now healthy Kremer isn't waiting for new laws. Today, his farm is drug-free—a change that he says has thus far saved him about \$16,000 in doctors' bills, vaccinations, and antibiotics.

"There's no antibiotics," Kremer said proudly. "I don't know why it took me that long to wake up to the fact that [administering the drugs] was not the right thing to do."

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*

### Don't Want To Eat Meat With Antibiotics?

There are two ways to avoid eating meat that contains antibiotics:

1. **Buy meat that is labeled *certified organic*.** This is the only guarantee that the meat doesn't have antibiotics and other harmful substances.
2. **Eat less meat.** You can replace meat with other foods that are rich in protein, such as beans and tofu.

<sup>1</sup> administer: to give or apply

<sup>2</sup> antibiotic: a medicine that kills germs called bacteria

<sup>3</sup> microorganism: a living thing that is visible only under a microscope

<sup>4</sup> pharmaceutical: having to do with medicinal drugs, often the producing, distributing, or selling of medicinal drugs

<sup>5</sup> resurge: to undergo a revival or comeback

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