

Keep Antibiotics Working members support World Health Organization Guidelines as appropriate response to global human health threat

WHO guidelines protect the use of medically important antibiotics for treatment in both food animals and humans

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Chicago, IL – The World Health Organization (WHO) has released recommendations regarding the use of antibiotics in agriculture.

Keep Antibiotics Working (KAW) members and allies support the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on reducing the use of medically important antibiotics in food animals as an essential path toward preserving the efficacy of these life-saving medicines. The WHO calls on countries to use medically important antibiotics only in food animals that are sick or exposed to sick animals. In addition, the WHO recommends that the antibiotics most important for human health not be used at all, or be used only to treat sick animals when nothing else will work.

“The WHO guidelines balance the need to treat sick animals with the higher priority to preserve antibiotics for treating sick people. Everyone agrees that farmers and veterinarians should treat sick animals, while also acknowledging that we should reserve some antibiotics exclusively for treating sick people” said Steve Roach, KAW spokesperson.

U.S. policy never allowed certain ‘last resort’ drugs, like vancomycin, to be given to farm animals, as they are needed for treating human illness when nothing else works. The FDA withdrew its approval for use of fluoroquinolones in poultry in 2005, because that use had undercut their effectiveness in human medicine. The WHO guidelines take a similar approach, allowing most antibiotics to be used for treatment in animals, but reserving the most important ones for people.

The WHO recommendations represent the next step U.S. policy needs to take to preserve antibiotics, most notably in their call for curtailing the use of medically important drugs to prevent disease in healthy animals. In 2000, the WHO recommended that medically important antibiotics not be used for growth promotion. Since that time, most major food producing countries have adopted the recommendation, including the U.S. However, the problem and overlapping practice of using antibiotics on animals that are not sick in anticipation of disease brought on by unhealthy conditions, has largely remained in place, including in the U.S. The WHO’s recommendations on “disease prevention” use have the potential to turn the tide on this unnecessary and risky practice.

These latest recommendations, like the ones issued by WHO in 2000, are supported by sound science. A WHO expert committee developed these guidelines based on multiple, independent systematic reviews of the available evidence on the link between antibiotic use in food animals and human health. The United Nations General Assembly adopted a political declaration on antimicrobial resistance in 2016, supported by all member countries, including the U.S. The Declaration called for action, and outlined initiatives to address antimicrobial resistance.

KAW participants and allies joining this statement:

Food Animal Concerns Trust

Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention

Consumer Federation of America

Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future

Health Care Without Harm

U.S. PIRG (Public Interest Research Group)

Antibiotic Resistance Action Center, the George Washington University