

HEALTH

We are treating antibiotics like sweets

WE read with mixed emotions the news report that claimed the Veterinary Services Department (VSD) had said antibiotic-free meat was more expensive.

We are surprised at the statement about the use of antibiotics in the poultry industry.

It appears VSD is more concerned about the price of antibiotic-free meat over the more serious risk posed by the misuse of antibiotics in food animals.

The injudicious use of antibiotics is a public health risk.

Of the eight basic consumer rights, the right to safety, the right to be informed and the right to choose apply to the matter being discussed.

Enshrined in these three rights is the right of consumers to know the risks involved so that an informed decision can be made before buying any product or service.

Consumers have the right to know if the chicken or meat bought contains antibiotics and is safe for consumption. Alternatively, consumers have the right to ask for antibiotic-free poultry and meat.

To buy or not is up to consumers, but the choice is informed.

Why the fuss about the use of antibiotics in poultry and meat products?

Is this because of concerns about the side effects from consuming meat products and poultry containing antibiotics?

The matter is actually more serious than the side effects.

Prior to the development of antibiotics, bacterial infections were the primary cause of human morbidity and mortality.

Since the discovery of penicillin in 1928, antibiotics have transformed medicine and saved millions of lives.

However, after many decades of overuse and misuse, some antibiotics are no longer as effective due mainly to the emergence of resistant bacteria.

Antibiotic resistance occurs through natural selection.

However, there are other social and administrative human factors that have accelerated the emergence and spread of resistance.



Consumers have the right to make an informed choice.

One cause is the misuse of antibiotics in human therapeutic treatment.

Another factor that cannot be discounted is the transmission of antibiotic resistant microbes to humans through farmed food.

The 2015 Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, commissioned by British Prime Minister and hosted by the Wellcome Trust, reported that in the United States, animals consumed more than twice as many medically-important antibiotics as humans.

The report also showed that of 139 academic studies, 72 per cent found evidence of a link between antibiotic consumption in food animals and resistance in humans.

In a BBC News article on May 19, Lord Jim O'Neill was quoted as saying, "... a campaign was needed to stop people treating antibiotics like sweets".

The report is the most comprehensive to date as it consolidates eight interim reports that recommend the need to reduce antibiotic use in agriculture, including a ban on those "highly critical" to human health.

The World Health Organisation



warns that if overuse and misuse of antibiotics in humans and animals continues, the resistance process will be accelerated, pushing the world towards a "post-antibiotic era" where minor bacterial infections become life-threatening. A minor cut on your arm may kill you.

We know that the use of antibiotics remains crucial in disease treatment and control in food animals.

However, anti-antibiotics groups are concerned about not just the overuse and misuse of antibiotics in livestock, but also the use of banned antibiotics, such as chloramphenicol and nitrofurans, in farmed animal products.

We trust in the authorities for the delivery of public services.

In the case of farmed animal products, we trust VSD to ensure that products sold are safe for consumption.

If the authorities think that antibiotic-free poultry and meat are expensive, they should provide more constructive alternatives, assistance and incentives to encourage farmers to adopt organic farming technology.

Regular farm inspections should

be carried out to assure hygiene and waste management to reduce the risk of infection.

There is sufficient evidence indicating that use of antibiotics as growth promoters does not give as much economic benefit as previously thought.

Adoption of more sustainable technology should be encouraged and incentivised.

Besides, the authorities should work with community and civil society organisations to educate the public.

In view of sufficient and mounting evidence in support of limiting the use of antibiotics in agriculture, VSD should take action to impose more stringent control on the use of antibiotics in food animals and help the industry to grow in a more sustainable way.

These efforts will slow down the spread and propagation of antibiotic resistance in the country.

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