

# Control usage of antibiotics

WE read with mixed emotions the report "Antibiotics-free meat more expensive, says Vet Dept" (*The Star*, May 16). We are surprised by the statement on the use of antibiotics in the local poultry industry made by the director-general (DG) of the Department of Veterinary Services. The DG seems more concerned with the price of antibiotics-free meat than the more serious risk posed by the misuse of antibiotics in food animals.

Clearly, the DG is not on the same page with the "anti-antibiotics groups" or he would not have made a public statement urging the public to disregard the claims of these groups. The DG is obviously not fully aware of the public health disaster that the injudicious use of antibiotics poses.

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 within these three rights is the right of the consumer to know the risks involved so that an informed decision can be made before purchasing any product or service. The consumer has the right to know if the chicken or meat that is being purchased contains antibiotics and if it is safe

for human consumption. Alternatively, the consumer has the right to ask for antibiotics-free poultry and meat. To buy or not to buy is entirely up to the consumer but the choice is informed.

Why the fuss over the use of antibiotics in poultry and meat products? Is this because of concerns about the immediate side effects of consuming poultry and meat products containing antibiotics? The matter is actually more serious than the immediate 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 modern 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 but there are other social and administrative human factors that have accelerated the emergence and spread of resistance. One major cause is, of course, the misuse of antibiotics in human therapeutic

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

The 2015 Review on Antimicrobial Resistance which was commissioned by the British Prime Minister and hosted by the Wellcome Trust reported that in the United States, animals consume more than twice as many medically important antibiotics as humans. Led by Lord Jim O'Neil, the review showed that of 139 academic studies, 72% found evidence of a link between antibiotics consumption in food animals and resistance in humans.

In a BBC news report dated May 19, Lord Jim O'Neil was quoted as saying, "... a campaign was needed to stop people treating antibiotics like sweets". This report is the most comprehensive to date as it consolidates eight previous interim reports that recommend, among others, reducing the unnecessary vast antibiotics use in agriculture, including a ban on those "highly critical" to human health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) warns that if overuse and misuse of antibiotics in both humans and animals continue, the

resistance process will be accelerated, pushing the world towards a "post-antibiotics 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 entrust relevant authorities for the delivery of essential public services. In the case of farmed animal products, we entrust the DVS with responsibility to ensure that products that are eventually sold in the marketplace are safe for human consumption.

If the authority thinks that antibiotics-free poultry and meat are expensive, it 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 proper waste management in order 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 incentivized. Besides that, the authority should work hand in hand with community and civil society organisations in educating the public.

In view of sufficient and mounting scientific evidence to support limiting the use of antibiotics in agriculture, the DVS should take prompt 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 go a long way towards slowing down the spread and propagation of antibiotic resistance in the country.

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