

Don't fear Ebola — beware of superbugs

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OSAGE, IA - AUGUST 09: Cattle gather for their morning feeding on a farm on August 9, 2014 near Osage, Iowa. In retaliation for sanctions imposed on them, Russia announced a ban on food imports from the United States and other nations. Those sanctions had been imposed due to Russia's support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine. The ban will last for a year and targets meat, fish, fruit, vegetable and milk products. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images) ORG XMIT: 506233403



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Truth be told, nobody should be much worried about Ebola sweeping the land, but we should be concerned about a far more present and dangerous threat to the health of all Americans — the dwindling power of antibiotics to knock out deadly diseases.

Modern medicine's golden age of antibiotics, hardly a century old, is in danger of staggering to a close with the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, leaving the world once again much more defenseless against such common and potentially lethal scourges as pneumonia, tuberculosis, meningitis and strep infections.

The good news is that just as Ebola can be contained, antibiotic resistance can be slowed, allowing time for new drugs to be developed. But it will take a commitment from government, the agricultural industry, medical doctors — and all of us.

A new White House report warns of the silent crisis of antibiotic resistance, echoing the dire warnings of a World Health Organization study released last spring. And the Food and Drug Administration reported last week that the widespread use of antibiotics in livestock — a major cause of antibiotic resistance in humans — continues to grow. Sadly, as U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky notes, such drugs routinely are used in factory farming to “help compensate for often horrific, unsanitary living conditions.”

Antibiotic resistance already is to blame in part for at least 23,000 deaths and 2 million illnesses each year, said Tom Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If the trend continues, another official said, antibiotic resistance will present “serious domestic and international challenge to human and animal health, national security and the economy.”

The White House plan is to rein in the misuse of antibiotics, which are overprescribed and often used inconsistently. This abuse of antibiotics promotes the evolution of “superbugs” — the classic case is with tuberculosis — that are much tougher to kill.

The White House also is encouraging the development of new drugs and quicker ways to diagnose bacterial infections. Doctors and veterinarians would be better able to decide when antibiotics are truly needed.

A task force is to report back to President Obama on ways to curtail the use of antibiotics in livestock. Most troubling to the FDA has been the growth in the agricultural sale of cephalosporins, a class of drug often used to treat bacterial infections in humans.

And what can we do? To begin with, doctors say, when we are prescribed an antibiotic — for, say, an ear infection — we should use the drug as directed and completely. Many people take an antibiotic only for as long as they feel the symptoms of their illness. But when they cut the drug regime short, the bacteria is not completely killed. It can roar back stronger than ever, a superbug.

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