

February 15, 2010

Mr. Sean McManus
President
CBS News and Sports
524 West 57th Street
New York, New York 10019

Dear Mr. McManus:

We were extremely disappointed with CBS's recent Evening News story on antibiotic use in the livestock industry. The story lacked any attempt at balance and largely accepted the arguments of opponents of conventional agriculture that drugs are overused in livestock and are a major cause of antibiotic resistance.

In fact, antibiotics are given to livestock strategically, when animals are sick, susceptible or exposed to illness. Modern livestock production facilities provide animals with an environment designed to keep them safe, healthy and comfortable. Also, there's no proof that antibiotic use on farms significantly increases resistant bacteria in humans. Since antibiotics have been used in livestock for half a century, if there was going to be an epidemic of resistance related to antibiotic use in agriculture, it would have occurred by now. The fact that it has not means that antibiotic use in animals is not a major risk to human health.

CBS glossed over the impact of over prescription in human medicine and instead focused on Denmark's ban on antibiotic "growth promoters" in hogs. Supporters of that ban used data very selectively to suggest antibiotic use has declined under the ban, and CBS's producers used that "fact" despite being given the raw data that showed the contrary. Also left out of the report were the views of a U.S. House delegation that visited Denmark recently to learn first-hand how successful the Danish ban has been. For the record: After Denmark put its ban in place, previously controlled swine diseases reemerged, pig deaths went up, therapeutic antibiotics used in pigs by veterinarians increased and pork production costs rose—all with no measurable positive effects on human health.

Also false was CBS's statement that "no one is really monitoring" antibiotic resistance in livestock. That statement ignores the existence of the National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System, or NARMS, conducted jointly by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Agriculture. NARMS data show that resistance in animal products has been either steady or declining in recent years.

CBS's linking of antibiotic use in pigs to the human threat of MRSA—Methicillin Resistant Staph aureus—was particularly irresponsible and could alarm viewers needlessly. For starters, CBS failed to distinguish between the different categories of MRSA, some of which can cause very serious illness and death and are most often found in health care facilities. There is no data suggesting that antibiotic use in pigs is responsible for the more virulent form of MRSA. The form discovered on pig farms is much less serious than the hospital-acquired—and even the community-acquired—human forms of MRSA. It does not cause illness in pigs and antibiotics are not used to treat it. Further, this strain of MRSA has not been found in human disease surveillance by either the CDC or the University of Iowa hospitals. Also, there is no indication that pork farmers have a higher rate of MRSA-associated illness than the general population, and the CDC has concluded that the vast majority of community-related MRSA infections result from person-to-person contact. None of these points was made by CBS, which chose instead to interview two pork farm workers who blame antibiotic use in pigs for contracting MRSA. Since the strain of MRSA associated with livestock, called strain 398, has not been found in human

disease surveillance, it is likely that these individuals contracted MRSA from contact with people, not pigs.

CBS made much of a study of farms in Iowa and Illinois, claiming that it found no MRSA infections on farms that did not use antibiotics. The full story is much more complicated. As Scott Hurd, former deputy undersecretary for food safety at the USDA and now professor at Iowa State University, explains: "First, this was a very small pilot study, which sampled fewer than 300 pigs. In it, only six farms used antibiotic-free production methods. The implication that this type of production is always free of MRSA is not true as there have been organic farms in other countries that have been found to be 100 percent positive for MRSA. On the other hand, in this Iowa study, some of the conventional farms that did use antibiotics were 100 percent free of MRSA. Secondly, there were two studies by the University of Iowa on MRSA in swine. The study that went unreported by CBS found conventional farms with MRSA rates in pigs of 23 percent, not 70 percent."

Also disturbing was your use of the pejorative terms "factory farming" and "industrial farming." These are anti-agriculture activist terms, and for CBS to embrace them gives them credibility they do not deserve. Modern farms are bio-secure to protect against disease and provide climate controlled environments. It's easy to select images of pens of animals without giving the context for why those animals are inside and in pens. Iowa in the winter can be a very cold place. Would Ms. Couric have preferred to see these animals standing unprotected in open fields?

There were numerous additional errors in the story that we don't have space to correct in this letter. We encourage you, however, to read a critique by Dr. Hurd. It is available at <http://vetmed.iastate.edu/news/isu-associate-professor-and-former-usda-deputy-undersecretary-food-safety-responds-cbs-news-seg>.

Conventional farmers would welcome a constructive discussion of all their production practices, including the use of antibiotics in livestock. But that requires a commitment to facts that the CBS story clearly lacked. It was sad to see that CBS could be so reckless and one-sided, and disappointing to find that it would take such a simplistic look at such a complex issue. As anti-meat and anti-agriculture advocates continue to push for legislation limiting the use of antibiotics in food animals, CBS may have the opportunity to revisit this subject. We hope future coverage will be more balanced.

Sincerely,

American Association of Bovine Practitioners
American Association of Swine Veterinarians
American Farm Bureau Federation
American Feed Industry Association
American Meat Institute
Association of Veterinary Biologics Companies
Association of Veterinarians in Turkey Production
Livestock Marketing Association
National Aquaculture Association
National Chicken Council
National Pork Board
National Pork Producers Council
National Institute for Animal Agriculture
National Renderers Association
National Turkey Federation