

Preserving the Blessings of Antibiotics

Drug makers, retailers and food producers are ramping up the fight.

By Tom Frieden

Posted: June 2, 2015

We are near a tipping point with antibiotic resistance. An increasing proportion of bacteria no longer respond to the drugs designed to kill them. We can either work to improve antibiotic use and prevent infections, or watch as the clock turns back to a world where simple infections kill people.

New blockbuster drugs will not solve this problem because microbes evolve faster than we're able to develop drugs to treat them. We have to change how we use antibiotics—stop squandering antibiotics and provide patients with the *right* medicine, in the right doses, at the right time. Antibiotic stewardship works, and it may save the life of your child or grandchild.

Today's White House Forum on Antibiotic Stewardship marks a major milestone in our fight against the threat of antibiotic resistance. Both public and the private sectors—including dozens of hospitals and health systems, food producers and retailers, pharmaceutical companies, clinical organizations and other leaders in human and animal health—are committing to ramp up efforts to confront and reverse one of today's most serious health threats. They are determined to avoid squandering these miracle drugs and prevent the spread of potentially deadly antibiotic-resistant infections.

As these leaders share their commitments, they are also sparking innovation. Large retailers such as Wal-Mart, Costco, Panera and McDonald's are working to provide more antibiotic-free food options to consumers, while several leading food producers are working to phase out the use in poultry production of antibiotics that are medically important to humans.

Large health-care systems, including Hospital Corporation of America and Ascension Health, plan to use the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Healthcare Safety Network (NHSN) to track the use of antibiotics and antibiotic resistance, and ensure that clinicians have the best information to give the best treatment to patients and learn when antibiotics may no longer be working.

Some health systems have committed to goals such as reducing inappropriate outpatient antibiotic use—which includes reducing the use of antibiotics for upper respiratory conditions, many of which are likely caused by viruses—and extending specialized infectious-disease expertise to rural settings. Others will work with more than 700 skilled nursing centers and senior living communities to reduce urinary-tract infections which often prompt antibiotic use in elderly patients and put them at risk for *C. difficile* infection, which can flourish in the digestive tract when antibiotics have killed off natural gut organisms that keep bacteria in check.

There are two important initiatives that support these efforts. The first is the forthcoming proposal by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for a flexible measure that will lead to hospitals and long-term-care facilities (e.g., nursing homes) implementing effective stewardship programs. The second is support from Congress for the president's 2016 budget, which would provide funding to the CDC for all states to implement protection programs.

CVS Health and Walgreens have announced commitments to educate patients and providers and introduce antibiotic stewardship into their retail health clinics—a rapidly growing segment of our health-care system. We will all work together to develop community stewardship programs. Such programs—for instance, the discussion and evaluation of programs that provide free or reduced-price antibiotics to patients—are a simple step that can reduce overuse.

These are only a sample of the many efforts now being rolled out. These complement continued commitments to core infection-control practices such as hand hygiene to prevent disease spread. Other companies and organizations should consider what they can do to protect antibiotics.

For its part, the administration has proposed critically needed investments to track and prevent antibiotic-resistant infections, accelerate efforts to find and stop outbreaks, support antibiotic stewardship in human health and veterinary medicine, and develop new drugs and diagnostics. These resources will be key to ensuring that the commitments made today are supported in the long term throughout private industry, our nation's health system, and governments at all levels.

Today we commit to protecting the effective antibiotics that remain in our arsenal and to preventing a future when the misuse of antibiotics allows simple infections to become untreatable. Together we will work to improve antibiotic use and protect the health of all Americans.

Dr. Frieden is the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.