

Local view: Area physicians join national effort on food safety

Poor nutrition is a risk factor for four of the six leading causes of death in the U.S. — heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer — yet most physicians receive little training in nutrition. And, until recently, many health-care providers were completely unaware of the important relationship between how we grow and distribute food and our health and health care.

A good example of this relationship is antibiotics. Since their discovery, antibiotics have been invaluable to physicians and patients in the treatment of bacterial illnesses. But the overuse of antibiotics has led to a crisis of antibiotic resistance. As a result of the decreased effectiveness of some antibiotics, patients suffer longer or more serious illnesses and pay higher medical costs. And physicians are limited by their treatment options. Because of concerns about antibiotic resistance, we doctors are trained to be cautious about unnecessarily prescribing antibiotics.

However, one of the greatest contributors to the problem is the overuse of antibiotics in large-scale, animal-production operations. An estimated 70 percent of the antibiotics and related drugs used in the United States are added to the feed and water of livestock and poultry that are not sick. The antibiotics are used not to treat diagnosed disease but to promote growth and/or to compensate for the overcrowded and often unsanitary conditions in large livestock feeding operations.

The Institute of Medicine and National Academy of Science states that “a decrease in antimicrobial use in human medicine alone will have little effect on the current antibiotic [resistance] situation. Substantial efforts must be made to decrease inappropriate overuse in animals and agriculture as well.”

The science demonstrating a link between farm practices and human illness is becoming increasingly hard to ignore. This year, an Iowa research team traveled to a variety of animal-production facilities and tested both animals and human workers for antibiotic resistance. Seventy percent of the hogs and a similar number of farm workers tested positive for MRSA, a superbug. The findings were consistent with studies in Canada and the Netherlands.

The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act of 2009 (PAMTA) is bipartisan legislation introduced in the House (HR 1549) and the Senate (S. 619) that is intended to help curb the growing problem of antibiotic resistance. In some countries in the European Union where feed uses of antibiotics have been greatly curtailed, total agricultural use of antibiotics has dropped more than 50 percent, resulting in less antibiotic resistance and no increase in consumer prices.

Considering all the effort we take in health care to protect our antibiotic “toolkit,” it is imperative we stop feeding antibiotics to healthy animals. It is also critical that the health-care community recognize the link between food production and health.

Our regional medical community is fortunate to have health-care leaders in synchrony with the national understanding around agriculture and health. St. Luke’s has added its name to a growing national list of hospitals and hospital systems supporting this legislation. Additionally, the American Medical Association has called on physicians to support a PAMTA petition promulgated by Health Care Without Harm. And our regional health-care community has responded admirably.

More regional hospital and practitioner support is necessary to bolster efforts, yet St. Luke’s and dozens of area nurses, dietitians, and physicians who already have signed the PAMTA petition deserve acknowledgement for their leadership.

When health-care leaders start looking at the broader picture and raise their voices in this way, meaningful change for good can and will occur.

Dr. Nancy Sudak practices at the Lake Superior Community Health Center in Duluth.