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Public Interest Groups Criticize Bayer Refusal To Comply With FDA Proposal To Ban Antibiotic Used In Poultry

Bayer decision could harm thousands of people each year, say groups

November 30, 2000 - Washington, DC. Health, consumer and public interest groups today criticized Bayer Corporation for refusing to comply with the Food and Drug Administration's proposed ban on the use in poultry of an antibiotic considered invaluable for treating human infections. Bayer's decision today that it will seek a hearing on the issue blocks the FDA's proposed ban from taking effect for months or even years.

Two companies have manufactured this type of antibiotic, called fluoroquinolones, for use in poultry. In response to the FDA proposal, Abbott Laboratories voluntarily withdrew its product, Saraflox, from the market. Bayer Corporation, maker of Baytril, has not.

The groups, which include the American Public Health Association (APHA) and ten others, vowed to participate vigorously in the FDA process. Last week, the groups released a letter signed by more than 180 physicians, nurses and other scientists and health professionals, as well as the American Medical Association and several other health organizations, calling on Bayer to comply voluntarily with FDA's proposed ban. In mid-November the APHA, with 50,000 members, adopted a policy noting that voluntary withdrawal of fluoroquinolones used in poultry would constitute the "quickest, most responsible way to address the public health threat" posed by this use.

On October 31, 2000, the FDA proposed to ban fluoroquinolones from use in poultry in light of recent sharp increases in resistance to these antibiotics in *Campylobacter* bacteria. *Campylobacter* is the most common cause of gastrointestinal illness acquired through food in the United States. FDA based its action on new evidence that use of Baytril and Saraflox in poultry increases the danger that humans will become infected with "superbugs," bacteria resistant to treatment with these fluoroquinolone drugs. FDA's mean estimate, using 1999 data, is that use of fluoroquinolones in chickens resulted in over 11,000 people that year with foodborne *Campylobacter* illness which was resistant to fluoroquinolones, contributing to unnecessarily severe disease.

Physicians have used fluoroquinolones as an essential treatment for foodborne disease since 1986. Fluoroquinolone-resistant bacteria were rare until 1995, when FDA approved use of these drugs in drinking water for poultry. By 1998, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that over 13% of the foodborne *Campylobacter*

bacteria infecting people were resistant to fluoroquinolones. Last year resistance rose to nearly 18%.

"The science makes this ban a no-brainer," said Margaret Mellon, with the Union of Concerned Scientists. "FDA simply cannot and should not allow these antibiotics to continue to be used in poultry when they're so important for people."

"Bayer's decision blocks FDA's efforts to protect public health," said Tamar Barlam, M.D., an Infectious Disease expert with the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "Bayer is acting as if its slogan is not Expertise with Responsibility, but Profits without Responsibility."

Scientists are also concerned about antibiotic use in animal agriculture that extends beyond the use of fluoroquinolones in poultry.

"Fluoroquinolones are only the tip of the iceberg," said David Wallinga, M.D., a physician with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minnesota. "FDA also needs to phase out about a half dozen other antibiotics important for the treatment of sick people but fed to healthy animals to grow them slightly faster and to compensate for overcrowded, unsanitary 'factory farm' conditions."

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Groups today criticizing Bayer's decision and supporting FDA's proposed ban include:

American Public Health Association, Karin Wallestad, (202) 777-2435

Center for Science in the Public Interest, Tamar Barlam, (202) 332-9110

Delmarva Poultry Justice Alliance, The Rev. Jim Lewis, (302) 537-5318

Environmental Defense, Karen Florini, (202) 387-3500

Food Animal Concerns Trust, Richard Wood, (312) 860-3930

Global Resource Action Center for the Environment, Alice Slater, (212) 726-9161

Humane Society of the United States, Suzanne Millman, (301) 258-3114

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, David Wallinga, (612) 870-3418

National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Brother David Andrews, (515) 270 2634

Physicians for Social Responsibility, Robert K. Musil, (202) 898-0150, ext. 221

Union of Concerned Scientists, Margaret Mellon, (202) 223-6133

