



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang
Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பினாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

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Dear Editor,

The World Antibiotics Awareness Week is on from 12-18 November. In conjunction with it, CAP is issuing a press release highlighting the problem of the use of antibiotics in food animals. Antibiotics is mis-used in Malaysia for livestock, fish and shrimp farms for growth promotion and disease prevention. This leads to tainting our meats with antibiotic residues and antibiotic resistant bacteria.

This very serious problem leads to increased antibiotic resistance which can cause deaths and bacterial infections to be untreatable.

We hope you will kindly highlight this problem in your paper.

CAP: Stop Exposing Consumers to Tainted Meats

As we take note of World Antibiotics Awareness Week from 12-18 November, one of the most pressing problems we face is the persistent presence of foods contaminated with antibiotic residues and antibiotic resistant bacteria.

Over the years the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) has raised concerns on the use of antibiotics in livestock production, agriculture and aquaculture in Malaysia, especially in animal feeds and the prevention of disease.

The routine use of antibiotics in animal feeds as a growth promoter and in the prevention of disease and infection is creating antibiotic resistance which can be transferred to humans. This global public health threat has prompted many countries including the European Union to ban the routine use of antibiotics in animal feeds. Antibiotics should never be abused to prevent disease and to promote growth in animals. They should only be used to manage and treat infections.

It is no surprise then that our foods are contaminated with antibiotic residues and antibiotic resistance bacteria.

The United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) banned shrimp and prawns from Malaysia in May 2016 because it contained two banned antibiotics Chloramphenicol and Nitrofurans.

The fact is these two antibiotics are banned for use in Malaysia since 1985. Yet they continue to pop up in our farmed fisheries and farmed meat products.

The presence of Chloramphenicol and Nitrofurans in our meat and fish is not new. In the late-1980s CAP's investigations showed commercial pig and poultry farms using Chloramphenicol. In 2002, the Health Ministry Parliamentary Secretary revealed that Nitrofurans and Chloramphenicol has been found in chickens tested.

In another food scare in November 2012, the Sarawak State Veterinary Authority banned the import of certain Ayam processed food products into the state due to the detection of Chloramphenicol in a sample of a chicken frankfurter.

Chloramphenicol can cause aplastic anaemia which can be fatal. Nitrofurans can be cancer causing and harmful to human health. Both these drugs are important for use in food producing animals in most countries.

There is 'no safe level of residues' for these drugs. Any food containing residues of these drugs at any concentration is deemed not fit for human consumption.

CAP in its surveys have found the indiscriminate use of antibiotics in commercial poultry and pig farms and the sale of antibiotics in shops selling animal feeds. As recent as January 2016, CAP found the antibiotics Erythromycin was widely available in shops selling animal feed in Kedah and Perlis. CAP was informed that the antibiotic is recommended to be routinely fed to animals as a growth promoter.

CAP has also found resistant bacteria in our meats. As early as 1988, CAP tests found penicillin-resistant bacteria in chicken, mutton and pork. Several strains of bacteria were also resistant to Neomycin and Chloramphenicol. This shows the rampant use of antibiotics in Malaysian farms.

In a study carried out by the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) in 2012, half of the domestic chickens were resistant to Ampicillin, Sulphonamide and Tetracycline. The situation was worse with imported chicken: 87% were Ampicillin resistant, 75% Nalidixic Acid resistant, and 50% Streptomycin and Sulphonamide resistant.

Food samples such as beef, mutton and chicken had antibiotic resistant Salmonella. The resistant Salmonella was isolated from imported beef and chicken as well.

Salmonella causes diarrhea (sometimes bloody), fever, and abdominal cramps. Resistant infections are more severe and have higher hospitalization rates. Salmonella is showing resistance to more classes of antibiotics and is a serious public health threat.

In another study of live chickens sold at wet markets in Selangor, of the 90 chickens examined more than 70% were positive for Campylobacter bacteria. The Campylobacter bacteria were resistant to four antibiotics while multi drug resistance (resistant to three or more antibiotics) was detected in more than a third of the bacteria samples.

Like Salmonella, Campylobacter spreads from animals to people through contaminated food especially raw or uncooked chicken. It causes bloody diarrhoea, fever and abdominal cramps, even temporary paralysis and even death.

Is it any wonder that reports of food poisoning (or antibiotic-resistant foodborne infections) are a frequent occurrence among the population in schools, public functions and even in hospital food resulting in hospitalization and deaths?

Four people died and 60 others were hospitalized after eating contaminated food during a wedding feast in Kedah in October 2013. The Health Department has singled out the chicken dish as the possible cause of food poisoning from Salmonella contamination according to news reports.

Despite this threat to public health, in May 2016, the Director General of DVS announced that ‘there are no plans to ban the use of antibiotics in the poultry industry’ as ‘no scientific research has proved that humans can suffer negative effects of antibiotics from eating meat’.

This shortsighted policy is all the more ironic when international fast food chains have started to move away from meat especially chicken raised with antibiotics.

McDonalds announced it will start globally rolling back the use of antibiotics in its chicken products from this year (2018) as part of efforts to curb microbial resistance to drugs and the rise of superbugs. It had undertaken this move in the US market in 2016.

In 2016, Papa John’s and Papa Murphy’s announced they had transitioned to poultry raised without antibiotics in their pizzas. Last year KFC said its poultry suppliers had been given until the end of 2018 to stop raising chickens using antibiotics important to human medicines.

The latest to join the bandwagon is Pizza Hut which has pledged to serve chicken raised without antibiotics important to human medicines in the US by 2022.

This is commendable but it is still left to be seen whether consumers in Malaysia will enjoy antibiotic free meats in their food from these fast food chains.

The need for drastic and comprehensive policy actions to ban the use of antibiotics in animal food production for growth promotion and feed efficiency is long overdue. It demands serious attention and swift action from the highest levels of government. In short the authorities must stop exposing the Malaysian public from tainted meats and foods.

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