



## **McDonald's Is Leading the Way, But Hasn't Gone Far Enough Yet - by Samuel S. Epstein, M.D., Chairman, Cancer Prevention Coalition**

CHICAGO, July 1 (AScribe Newswire) -- Responding to growing concerns that the routine use of antibiotics in meat production has resulted in their decreased effectiveness for treating infectious diseases, McDonald's Corporation has demanded that its suppliers phase out antibiotic growth promoters by the end of 2004. This trailblazing initiative is backed by Burger King, Wendy's, and KFC, and by Elanco, the nation's largest veterinary drug company. However, McDonald's initiative excludes hormonal growth promoters.

When beef cattle enter feedlots, hormone pellets are implanted under the ear skin, a process that is repeated at the mid-point of their 100-day pre-slaughter fattening period. The hormones increase cattle weight, adding about \$80.00 profit per animal.

The commonest hormone in current use is the potent cancer-causing, and gene-damaging estradiol. Other hormones include progesterone, testosterone, and their synthetic variants. However, the FDA and USDA claim that residues of these hormones in meat are within "normal" levels, and could not possibly induce any harmful effects. However, of 130 million livestock slaughtered annually, few, if any, have been monitored for residues of estradiol or any other hormone.

In sharp contrast, confidential industry reports to the FDA, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, have revealed high hormone residues in meat under idealized test conditions. Following a single implant in a steer of Synovex-S, a combination of estradiol and progesterone, estradiol levels in different meat products were over 20-fold higher than normal. The amount of estradiol in two hamburgers eaten daily by an 8-year-old boy would increase his hormone residues by at least 10 percent over very low natural levels.

However, the situation may be much worse in real life. An unpublicized random USDA survey of 32 large feedlots found that as many as half the cattle had illegal "misplaced implants" in muscle, rather than under the ear skin. This would result in very high local concentrations of hormones, and in meat all over the body. Besides such abusive practice, accidental implantation of hormone pellets in neck muscle, rather than under ear skin, is not uncommon and would also result in high residues in meat.

These sex hormones, particularly estradiol, are linked ever more closely to the escalating incidence of reproductive cancers since 1973: 54 percent for post-menopausal breast cancer, 67 percent for testicular cancer, and 105 percent for prostate cancer. Of particular concern also is the increasing incidence of premature puberty in young girls, which has been linked to hormonal meat.

The endocrine disruptive effects of estrogenic industrial chemicals, including pesticides, cosmetic ingredients, and food contaminants, are now under intensive investigation by federal regulatory and health agencies. But the contamination of meat with residues of the much more potent estradiol, besides other sex hormones, remains ignored.

Europe has been highly skeptical of U.S. claims on the safety of hormonal meat, and banned its sale and import since 1989. In 1997, the U.S. and Canada appealed this ban before the World Trade Organization (WTO) on the grounds that it was discriminatory trade practice, and not scientifically justified. The WTO ruled in favor of the appeal on the narrow and arguable technical grounds that the

European Commission (EC) had not undertaken a formal quantitative "health risk assessment," and imposed financial penalties on the EC.

The EC then requested a "Scientific Committee" of nine independent experts, including four from the U.S., to undertake a comprehensive risk assessment of all growth-promoting hormones. By 1999, the Committee concluded that the risk to consumers had been clearly established, and that safe exposure levels could not be identified for any of these hormones. They further warned that exposure to even small traces in meat posed carcinogenic, endocrine, and genetic risks, especially for pre-pubertal children because of their "extremely low level" of production of sex hormones. In striking contrast, despite the EC's repeated requests, the U.S. has failed to produce any scientific information or publications on which they still base their claims of safety.

The EC went further by funding 17 comprehensive studies on hormone residues in meat. All these, most already published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, further document the carcinogenic, genetic, and other risks of hormonal meat.

McDonald's should further strengthen its "Social Responsibility" campaign by extending concerns on the dangers of growth-promoting agents, from the antibiotic to the hormonal.

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