

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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October 11, 2020

## “COVID-19 Distracts from Imminent Global Infectious-Disease Threat”

According to the CDC, nearly 3 million Americans per year contract an antibiotic-resistant bacterial infection. Of those, roughly 35,000 die. Globally, approximately 700,000 die from these infections every year. The World Health Organization projects that, at current rates, around 10 million people could die from antibiotic-resistant infections annually by 2050. As bacteria become more resistant to antibiotics, the risk of catastrophic consequences increases. **Antibiotic resistance** is one of the biggest public health challenges of our time. Antibiotic resistance leads to higher medical costs, prolonged hospital stays, and increased mortality. Because of the over prescription of antibiotics, the overuse of them in livestock, and other factors, many different kinds of bacterial infections including strains of gonorrhea, tuberculosis, and salmonella have become extremely hard, sometimes even impossible, to treat. That's because the tiny portion of bacteria that survive these antibiotics evolve and reproduce, developing resistance. Around the world, 230,000 die each year from antibiotic-resistant tuberculosis alone. It's increasingly likely that that bacterial infections will be very difficult to treat if not untreatable. A May review found that among about 2,000 hospitalized COVID-19 patients worldwide, 72% received antibiotics even though only 8% had documented bacterial or fungal infections. Experts say that the superbug crisis (“nightmare bacteria”) has been simmering along and needs to be discussed more often. Carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae (CRE) are a group of bacteria that have become resistant to “all or nearly all” available antibiotics, including carbapenems, which are typically reserved as the “treatment of last resort” against drug-resistant pathogens. Antibiotics cannot kill viruses or help you feel better when you have a virus. Much of the attention and resources that would be devoted to the bacteria threat are currently directed toward trying to defeat COVID-19. It's been decades since a new class of antibiotics has been developed. And pharmaceutical giants like Novartis and Allergan have abandoned the effort altogether, because of a decreased profit margin. They can make more money by developing drugs people take regularly rather than only when they have an infection. Outside of developing new antibiotics, a type of virus could be the solution. A category of virus called phages naturally target and kill specific types of bacteria. If you can find the particular phage that kills the bacteria a person is infected with, you could use it to treat their infection. IPATH is now preparing to begin the first National Institutes of Health-funded clinical trial of phage therapy. Currently, reports list 18 antibiotic-resistant bacteria and fungi as serious.

In the America that I love, antibiotics seem to be everywhere and the more we abuse antibiotic consumption, the quicker drug resistant bacteria develop. Please request and use antibiotics responsibly and do not use them to treat viral infections.

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