Parents give kids useless, risky drugs

By Tim Friend
USA TODAY 10/5/94

Parents often give over-the-counter drugs to preschool children to treat colds, despite potential for harm and little proof the drugs are effective.

A survey of 8,145 mothers of 3-year-olds found 53.7% of the kids had been given an OTC drug in the previous 30 days, mostly cold medicine and Tylenol, says Michael Kogan of the National Center for Health Statistics. Findings, in today's *Journal of the American Medical Association*:

- 70% of children with a recent illness got OTC drugs.
- Half of kids had been given two types of drugs.
- White, married, educated mothers with good incomes were most likely to give drugs.

FDA's Dr. Michael Weintraub says side effects are generally not serious, but there is potential for adverse reactions and oversedation.

Parents feel the need to do something for a sick child and in the process "become easy prey to ... promotion by drug companies," says Dr. Anne Gadomski of the University of Maryland, in an editorial in the same issue.

From 1985-89, 670,000 reports were made to poison control centers involving over-the-counter drugs and children under age 6.

The truth, she says, is preschool kids experience 4 to 8 upper respiratory tract infections a year that are caused by viruses, and there is no cure for these infections. They commonly go away by themselves in 5 to 7 days.

Overuse of antibiotics real threat

By Doug Levy
USA TODAY 4/28/94

"Crazy" overuse of antibiotics is one reason drug-resistant diseases such as TB, staph and pneumonia are on the rise, say experts in today's *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Taking antibiotics "is not like taking an aspirin," says lead author Alexander Tomasz, Rockefeller University microbiology professor.

"There's vast overuse," he says. "It's completely crazy."

Among germs resisting conventional treatments:

- *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, which causes pneumonia, meningitis, otitis media and about 40,000 deaths each year.
- *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Enterococcus faecium*, leading causes of in-hospital infections; drug-resistant strains now account for about 1 million infections a year.
- Drug-resistant *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* has surfaced in 35 states since 1985.

Another problem: use of antibiotics in the food chain — to stop diseases among cattle, fish or other animals — enables germs to build resistance.

Though it may keep both animals and humans from getting sick now, it raises the risk that bacteria will develop antibiotic-resistant genes, says Tomasz.

Over time, "the resistant gene shows up where it can cause trouble," he says.

The experts call for:

- Better infection control in hospitals.
- Increased monitoring.
- More research toward new medications.

But "hand in hand with meticulous infection control must go reductions in the inappropriate use of antibiotics," says Dr. Barbara Murray, University of Texas Medical School.

Worldwide health implications of the problem are the topic at a meeting this week in Prague, The Czech Republic.