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Fish antibiotics risky for people
Doctors warn against using unregulated drugs from pet stores

By SARAH GOFORTH Staff Writer

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Some common antibiotics are available to people without prescriptions, and virtually unregulated, in the fish aisles of popular pet stores.

In a letter published in Thursday's issue of The New England Journal of Medicine, three doctors at the Pentagon told of a patient who acknowledged buying unprescribed antibiotics at a pet store. The doctors warned that since pet medications were not regulated for use by people, their quality and potency were questionable. Such antibiotics, intended to prevent fish infections, are often sold as tablets to be dissolved in aquarium water. They are available in several Dallas-area pet stores and can also be purchased online from major pet store chains.

Some of the pet store medications - erythromycin, ampicillin and tetracycline, for example - are the same as those frequently used to treat people. But products marketed for fish are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration and do not require prescriptions. Prescriptions are required for the purchase of antibiotics for most other animals, including dogs and cats.

The soldier's story

Brandon J. Goff, a physician at the Pentagon Clinic in Washington, D.C., became aware of the widespread availability of these drugs after an Army special forces soldier with a chronic sinus infection visited the physician's office. The soldier said he had been treating his infection with penicillin but was somewhat evasive, at first, about where he had purchased the antibiotic.

After some prodding, Dr. Goff said, the patient admitted buying the antibiotic from a local pet store. Special forces soldiers commonly buy medications from pet stores to avoid visiting a doctor who might remove them from assignments, the patient told Dr. Goff. "The FDA says to you and me, there are no antibiotics you can have unless we approve them and your doctor prescribes them," Dr. Goff said. Physicians may be largely unaware that this source of antibiotics even exists, he said.

When Dr. Goff visited two major pet store chains, he said, he was incredulous. "You find the same exact pills that your doctor would prescribe for you, and you can just buy them," he said. But while the antibiotic may be the same, the formulation is likely to be different in medications marketed for pets.

The use of these products by people is almost certainly not limited to military personnel, Dr. Goff said. People who fear being denied insurance if their records indicate certain medical conditions, or those who can't afford doctor's visits because they lack health insurance, might also seek out the drugs.

'Do you have a big tank?'

Pet Town in Arlington stopped selling antibiotics last year, said owner Charlene Lipenski. She noticed an increase in the number of people buying large quantities of the drugs stocked for fish and birds - especially after Sept. 11 - and became suspicious.

"I'd say, 'Do you have a big tank?'" Ms. Lipenski said. "A few admitted why they were buying the antibiotics." Some said they were buying the medication as protection from anthrax. Ms. Lipenski took the products off of the shelves to prevent people from misusing the medications.

Aquatic Design Aquariums in Plano, a store specializing in fish supplies and custom aquariums, stocks several antibiotics, including penicillin and tetracycline.

Manager Federico Hernandez said the bottles were clearly marked with warnings stating that the drugs were not for human consumption, but he had heard of people using the medications nonetheless.

"We've had some people walk in and say they use it on themselves," Mr. Hernandez said. Ira Leviton, an attending physician at Montefiore Medical Center in New York, said he, too, had heard of patients procuring antibiotics for personal use from pet stores. And, he said,

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the practice is inherently dangerous.

"Most laypeople won't know the proper antibiotic to use ... and there's a good chance that the dose will not be the proper dose even if it's the right antibiotic," Dr. Leviton said. And, he said, while a physician would ask a patient about potential allergies, pet medicine labels might show only a brand name. People who don't inspect the ingredient list might take a drug that would trigger an allergic reaction.

"It amazes me what people do sometimes," said Shawn Underwood, a communications representative of San Diego-based Petco.

The Dallas store on West Camp Wisdom Road carries tetracycline and penicillin, although manager Mark Bruscher said he was unaware that the products were sometimes purchased for human consumption. The Mesquite branch of the store also carries the antibiotics.

Lower dose, higher cost

Judy St. Leger, a consulting veterinarian for Petco's corporate offices, says it would be foolish for a person to take any medicine designed for other species. The antibiotics are used to treat fish illnesses such as the common infection known as "ick," Dr. St. Leger said.

"You'd have to be pretty industrious to treat yourself with pet store medication," Dr. St. Leger said, because most of the treatments sold in pet stores are available only in the small quantities required to treat fish. Without medical advice, people would not know how much to take, for how long.

Petco sells a package of eight 250-mg tablets of tetracycline online for \$3.49, considerably more than a person might pay for the same amount of the drug at a pharmacy. At Eckerd Drug on Cockrell Hill Road in Duncanville and at drugstore.com, for example, 30 250-mg capsules of the drug cost \$7.99.

Because the FDA approval process is arduous and expensive, Dr. St. Leger said, it makes little sense to require it for the fish medication market.

Phoenix-based Petsmart sells a variety of antibiotics on its Web site. The company declined to comment, citing Securities Exchange Commission regulations restricting public statements during a period preceding a public stock offering.

In addition to the potential for medical problems, it is widely thought that the misuse of antibiotics could contribute to the evolution of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. "This should provoke discussion in the medical community and in the regulatory community," Dr. Goff said.

Staff writers Kim Horner, Katie Menzer and Kristen Holland contributed to this report.

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