

Lessons Along the Path of Most Resistance

WHAT FUNDERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE KEEP ANTIBIOTICS WORKING COALITION

In less than four years, an unusual mix of foundations and nonprofits has placed a little-known issue on the map, convinced a giant industry to begin changing its practices, and taken great strides towards protecting public health. The coalition's story is still being written, but its success so far offers insights into how philanthropy may evolve in the years to come.

By Andy Goodman

Global Business Network and Monitor Institute, members of the Monitor Group



Symptoms

Put yourself inside this story, one that starts routinely enough with a baby's cry in the middle of the night. Earlier in the day, your 3-month-old daughter was having trouble keeping food down, but now her forehead is almost hot to the touch. The intensity of her wailing tells you this is more than a "tummy ache," and you hurriedly dress her for the car ride to the nearest emergency room.

After what seems like an eternity, the nurse mumbles your daughter's name through an intercom and the doctor on call arrives. As he glances at her chart and takes the baby from your arms, you reflexively give him the Protective Parent Once-Over and conclude, "Too young," but his questions skillfully elicit a likely culprit: uncooked chicken, or to be more precise, a few drops of the meat's juice that probably contaminated the baby's food while you were preparing dinner. He diagnoses a bacterial infection and prescribes a cure with a reassuring brand name: Bactrim, an antibiotic your family has relied on before.

But this is where the story takes a turn that is anything but routine. After a few days on her medicine, your daughter is not improving. If anything, the child is getting worse, and for the first time you are genuinely worried. An appointment with your family pediatrician—known, trusted, *older*—does not bring the expected relief. Instead, she informs you that the bacteria causing your daughter's suffering is apparently resistant to certain antibiotics. There may be alternative drugs worth trying, she adds, but they will be more expensive and the side effects may be worse.

And there are no guarantees they will work.

This troubling scenario, now better known as "antibiotic resistance," is on the rise in the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control, reported cases in which salmonella was resistant to antibiotic treatment rose from zero to nearly 36 percent between 1980 and 1997. Experts now estimate that antibiotic resistance in the U.S. is costing at least \$4 billion to \$5 billion in increased medical expenses each year, and they place the number of related deaths in the thousands. The problem has two causes: the overuse of antibiotics in human medicine and the extraordinarily massive feeding of antibiotics to *healthy* animals on factory farms (see sidebar, *A Short Course in Antibiotic Resistance*).

A Short Course in Antibiotic Resistance

Throughout America, more bacteria are becoming resistant to antibiotics, and unnecessary farming practices are a major cause. To understand how factory farms can lessen the effectiveness of medicine we count on, take a quick journey along the path of *most* resistance:

It starts during feeding time at the "pharm."

To make chickens, hogs, and beef cattle grow slightly faster, factory farm operators routinely include antibiotics in their feed. These drugs also help prevent diseases that can spread quickly in the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions that often prevail in such large operations. The Union of Concerned Scientists has estimated that as much as 70 percent of all antibiotics used in the U.S. each year are fed to animals *that are not sick*, and this is where the problem begins.

Now imagine an episode of "Survivor," except for bacteria.

Whenever antibiotics are used, some bacteria will eventually be able to withstand their effects. This is a natural process, but it is artificially accelerated by factory farms that unnecessarily serve antibiotics to thousands of animals on a daily basis. Under these heightened conditions, each animal becomes, in effect, an incubator for newly resistant strains of bacteria. Over time, some bacteria—the so-called "superbugs"—become resistant to several different types of antibiotics, including those used in medicine for humans.

You can't keep a superbug down on the farm.

Resistant bacteria living in animals' intestinal tracts can contaminate meat during slaughter. If this meat is undercooked, or if its juices contaminate other food, the bacteria can now complete their journey from farm to fork—and into a human stomach. Water and soil can also be contaminated by resistant bacteria that escape from animal manure-storage lagoons, a common feature on factory farms. People who drink untreated water or swim in contaminated lakes or rivers offer another escape route for the resistant bacteria. Finally, farm workers may become infected while caring for animals that are fed antibiotics, and can then pass resistant bacteria to others in their family and community.

From "wonder drugs" to "I wonder why they're not working."

A visit to the doctor's office may take an unexpected turn as the patient discovers that the prescribed antibiotics are ineffective against what would normally have been a minor bacterial infection. In this increasingly common scenario, the doctor would be forced to try other drugs (often more expensive or with more severe side effects), while the patient's illness progresses. In some cases, there are no effective alternatives.

At stake is nothing less than the efficacy of the “miracle drugs” Americans have relied on for years, and yet antibiotic resistance received very little attention until recently. Until the late 1990s, the press virtually ignored it, which meant the issue was also absent from the average person’s radar. Without public pressure or a bright media spotlight, the practices that contributed to the dramatic increase in antibiotic resistance continued unabated. And even though concern within the scientific community was steadily mounting, it was not enough to cut through this apathy. Little wonder, then, that federal regulators who could have done something about the problem were largely ignoring it, too.

Today, the picture looks very different. Stories about antibiotic resistance have appeared on the front pages of major newspapers around the country and in newscasts on network and cable television (see sidebar, *KAW Hits the Big Time*). Two of the country’s largest bulk purchasers of meat—the fast-food giant McDonald’s and Bon Appetit, the nation’s fourth-largest institutional food-service company—have adopted policies directing their chicken suppliers to reduce antibiotic use and creating a purchase preference for beef and pork suppliers who follow suit. And in both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, bipartisan legislation is pending that will broaden and institutionalize the changes already begun among food animal producers and meat buyers. In sum, agricultural overuse of antibiotics is finally being addressed, and ongoing public scrutiny is cause for optimism that the tide may be turning on this important contributor to the major national health problem of antibiotic resistance.

This turnabout might not have occurred without the contribution of the Keep Antibiotics Working coalition. Non-profits such as the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), Environmental Defense (ED), the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), and the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) had been working on this issue well before the coalition came into existence, and foundations including Joyce, Nathan Cummings, and Jennifer Altman subsidized much of this early work. But it was not until all these parties and several others joined forces that a genuine breakthrough was achieved.

For the funding community, however, there is more to be found here than simply another story of a whole that exceeds the sum of its parts. By taking a closer look at how this particular coalition coalesced, identified its priorities, and conducted its business on a day-to-day basis, funders may be catching a glimpse of an important new trend in American philanthropy.

Rx: Widen the Lens...

Early in 1998, Margaret Mellon and Rebecca Goldberg found themselves in a taxi together, crawling through New York City traffic. That morning, Mellon, director of the Food & Environment Program at UCS, and Goldberg, a senior scientist with Environmental Defense, had met with an editorial board member at *The New York Times* to discuss the genetic engineering of food. Sitting in the cab with plenty of time to talk, the conversation eventually moved to another food-related issue that was equally troubling: antibiotic resistance.

KAW Hits the Big Time

On February 10, 2002, an article entitled “Poultry Industry Quietly Cuts Back on Antibiotic Use” appeared on the front page of *The New York Times*. “Above the fold,” Karen Florini of Environmental Defense, who chairs KAW’s steering committee, proudly pointed out. For her, however, even this major media hit was not the defining moment in the coalition’s battle for public awareness. That would come two months later when *The Onion*, the satirical online newspaper, ran a story entitled, “U.S. Children Getting Majority of Their Antibiotics from McDonald’s Meat” on its homepage. “This was the indication that we had really hit the big-time,” said Florini, chuckling over the headline.

Both women were familiar with the problem: alarmingly large amounts of antibiotics were being fed to *healthy* chickens, hogs, and beef cattle on factory farms. This widespread agricultural practice was intended to accelerate the growth process and serve as a preventative against the outbreak of disease despite poor animal husbandry practices, but Mellon and Goldberg believed it was also undermining the efficacy of antibiotics used in human medicine.

“I made the case that we should take on antibiotic use in animal production,” Goldberg recalled, and she offered three reasons. First, antibiotic resistance had the potential to become a major threat to public health. Second, there was solid science to connect the rise in resistance to activities on factory farms. And third, Goldberg believed that changes in the agricultural industry could, in fact, be achieved. Mellon concurred, and saw an additional reason for moving forward: challenging the excessive use of antibiotics in agriculture would require the attention of both the environmental *and* health communities, two huge sectors representing hundreds of nonprofits and foundations. Perhaps, Mellon speculated, this issue could open new lines of communication, connecting two worlds that tended to think and act independently.



The two women agreed to work on antibiotic resistance together, and they soon found an ally in Margaret O’Dell, an environmental program officer at the Joyce Foundation. Based in Chicago and geographically focused on the Great Lakes region, Joyce runs an environment program with a traditional focus on resource-based issues such as water pollution and land use. For the foundation, antibiotic resistance would be a stretch, but it was one that O’Dell was inclined to make.

“We had to make a pretty strong case to our board,” said O’Dell, “that even though this was not our issue, there was this link to the spread of gigantic animal agricultural operations.” O’Dell won the support of her trustees, and in August 1998 she commissioned Goldberg, Mellon, and Jane Rissler of UCS to co-author a white paper on antibiotic resistance. “This was our way of building intellectual capital on the issue,” O’Dell said.

Half a continent away and a few months later, a similar conversation took place between Michael Lerner and Mark Walters. Lerner, president of the Jennifer Altman Foundation, was also interested in the nexus between environmental issues and public health. He had just begun the Health & Environmental Funders Network (HEFN) with the express purpose of providing a forum in which like-minded colleagues from the philanthropic community could regularly share information and collaborate.

Mark Walters was a charter member of HEFN. As director of the environment program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Walters had launched the Ecological Health program to support projects where public health, ecosystem health, and animal health were all involved. Like Lerner, he recognized that some problems looming on the horizon could not be solved by discretely focusing on a single aspect such as environmental impacts. They required a more holistic approach, and that meant program officers from different fields had to start working together.

“There are those who fund ecology, those who fund animals, and others who focus on public health,” said Walters, “and they’re different people. They talk differently. They *dress* differently. Antibiotics was the perfect issue to cut across these areas.” Lerner agreed, and in the spring of 2000 he convened a conference call to bring together some of the funders and NGOs who were already working on antibiotic resistance. While it would still be several months before a coalition would formally be created, the participants in the call quickly realized they were already united by a common vision, one that could only come by looking at the problem through a wider lens.

...And Sweat the “Soft Stuff”

In October 2000, a two-day conference supported by Cummings and Altman was held at the Airlie House outside Washington, D.C., to gather all the key players. Along with those groups mentioned above, there was an eclectic mix representing the Humane Society, Del Marva Poultry Justice, the Cox Charitable Trust, Agua Foundation, and several other organizations with a stake in the issue. Animated, if sometimes contentious, discussions led to several tangible outcomes:

- A coalition with clear operating guidelines was created, and a timeline was put in place to give it a name, visual identity, and all the other earmarks of an ongoing entity, including a formal public launch. (At the same time, it was understood that individual NGOs could continue with their own projects and maintain separate relationships with funders.)
- Coalition members agreed to proceed simultaneously on three tracks: a *media* track, to increase public awareness of the issue; an *industry* track, to encourage food producers and bulk purchasers of meat to voluntarily eliminate the unnecessary use of antibiotics; and a *policy* track, to pursue legislation and regulations that would ban certain antibiotics from being used as routine feed additives in the agricultural sector.

- Michael Jacobson of CSPI, Karen Florini of ED, Mark Ritchie of IATP, and Margaret Mellon of UCS formed an executive committee that would represent all coalition NGOs when it came time for discussions with funders. The funders also formed an executive committee with Michael Lerner, Mark Walters, and Herbert Bedolfe of Homeland Foundation representing the larger group.
- Finally, the coalition members agreed to hire a director who could work full-time to coordinate internal discussions and centralize some key tasks (e.g., media outreach). Until that person was found, the funders and NGOs asked Karen Florini of Environmental Defense to continue as interim director, a role she had been playing from shortly after the initial conference call.

Looking back after four years of operation, coalition members agreed that they were well served by many of the choices made at this first meeting (see sidebar, *The Big Break Nobody Wanted*). The creation of an executive committee among the NGOs recognized and honored the fact that some organizations were going to invest more time and money in the work of the coalition than others. It also promised to expedite decision-making even as the coalition grew through the addition of other NGOs and funders. The agreement to centralize certain functions—most notably around media outreach—also would reduce friction along the way. “This prevented having to constantly negotiate who puts out the release, requiring each organization’s press office to review and approve copy, et cetera,” said Margaret Mellon. “And that meant at the end of four years, we still like each other.”

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Shrewd streamlining was also applied to the dissemination of certain funds. Early on, the Homeland Foundation made a grant of \$200,000 to the Philanthropic Collabora-

tive to set up an “opportunity fund.” If the coalition or an individual group needed money quickly to capitalize on a time-sensitive opportunity, a representative could submit a brief, one- to two-page proposal with the expectation of receiving funding in less than a week. Homeland still had oversight and could reject proposals if they didn’t fit the overall strategy, but according to Herbert Bedolfe, the foundation never had to exercise this option. (In fact, he recently made a third grant to replenish the fund that continues to fast-track proposals today.)

By sweating the big stuff (strategic planning, funding) and the small stuff (press releases), the Keep Antibiotics Working coalition laid the foundation for success. Having funders involved from the very beginning gave the NGOs financial security and a level of confidence they might not otherwise have had. But if you asked KAW’s members—NGOs and funders alike—what distinguished this coalition from others, they would probably move the conversation to an entirely different level.

“Success requires a very high and developing basis of trust,” said Michael Lerner, “and that is not automatic. I have seen campaigns where that trust does not develop, and absent that trust, this model doesn’t work.” Right from the start, the funders made it clear that decisions would be left to the NGOs. “The groups knew the issues much better than any of us,” said Mark Walters, “and we weren’t about to tell them how to spend the money. We didn’t want to start a new program on our terms.”

Nowhere was this trust more evident than in the coalition’s decision to focus on the agricultural causes of antibiotic resistance. Several of the funders believed that the excessive use of antibiotics in human medicine—the other major cause of rising resistance—should also be addressed. As Lerner recalled, he and his colleagues made a strong recommendation in this regard, only to be turned down by the NGOs, who maintained that other groups were already focusing on medical overuse while the agricultural issue was being largely ignored. “And I was proud to be turned down,” said Lerner. “That was the dynamic we were looking for. We wanted the capacity to make our case, but they were authentically responsible for the strategy.”

Respect went hand in hand with trust, and Karen Florini saw this evidenced in the early conference calls that Lerner facilitated. “[The funders] modeled good coalition behavior,” she recalled, “Michael in particular. He was always orderly about the process, started on time, and spoke in ways that were supportive and positive.” Margaret O’Dell came away from those early calls with a similar feeling. “Michael did an incredible job of getting people involved and interested. He was very quick to pick up on what people were saying—very Buddhist. He gently got everyone into the mix and moved things along in a way that got everybody heard.”

As the funders invested more authority and accountability in the NGOs, it was evident that respect flowed in this direction as well—especially where Karen Florini’s contributions were concerned. “Karen’s exceptional set of skills, her ability to manage details, her strategic thinking—it all helped set the tone for the campaign,”

The Big Break Nobody Wanted

While the coalition benefited from good planning, the fallout from September 11 gave the issue of antibiotic resistance an unexpected — and significant — lift. Speculation on a biological attack with anthrax as the weapon of choice led to a run on the antibiotic Cipro, and that led to articles and editorials explaining how the overuse of Cipro could ultimately undermine its effectiveness. On November 3, 2001, an op-ed in *The New York Times* entitled, “What If Cipro Stopped Working?” included this fact: “The widespread use of Baytril in chickens has already been shown to decrease Cipro’s effectiveness in humans for some types of infections.”

said Mark Walters. “She laid the foundation that a permanent coordinator could build on.” Herbert Bedolfe of the Homeland Foundation had a similar appraisal for KAW’s chair. “She kept everyone on the same page, moving ahead, and having concrete successes.”

And yet, even words such as “trust” and “respect” may be too solemn to accurately describe what united, motivated, and sustained this particular group of people. “We tend to have a ‘come one, come all’ way of doing business,” said Rebecca Goldberg, reflecting on her experience with other public interest coalitions, “but it sometimes leads to inaction.” On occasion, Goldberg added, it pays to be more selective in the people you invite to the party. Sometimes, you get more done simply because you’re working with people you *like*.

Catherine Porter, former director of the Consultative Group on Biodiversity, now helps coordinate discussions between the funders and NGOs in the Keep Antibiotics Working coalition. “Being good on the issue isn’t enough,” said Porter. “Having experience in other coalitions, knowing how to work in partnership—that’s just as important.” From her perspective, anyone who says, “It’s not personal—it’s just business,” is probably not cut out for coalition work. Porter recalled an experience she had trying to rescue a coalition that was starting to disintegrate. “More pancake breakfasts,” she said, laughing as she described the solution that sounds absurd but was, in fact, the way she got the coalition’s members talking to one another. “The second it became personal again,” said Porter, “it all started to work.”

McDonald’s, the world’s largest meat purchaser, has adopted a policy aimed at more broadly reducing antibiotic use by its suppliers, and KAW is pressuring other bulk purchasers to follow this example.

Prognosis

Because of pressure from KAW, the majority of poultry producers in the U.S. have promised to end the routine use of certain antibiotics that are also crucial in human medicine. McDonald’s, the world’s largest meat purchaser, has adopted a policy aimed at more broadly reducing antibiotic use by its suppliers, and KAW is pressuring other bulk purchasers to follow this example. In the Senate, Ted Kennedy and Olympia Snowe have worked to recruit additional bipartisan cosponsors to a bill that would create enforceable limits on feeding medically important antibiotics to healthy chickens, hogs, and cows; Sherrod Brown and Wayne Gilchrest have taken similar steps in the House. Periodic news reports about antibiotic resistance continue to keep the issue on the public radar, and other opportunities are pushing the issue forward in several states.

Recently, the coalition has also begun working directly with groups of farmers. As Karen Florini notes, “There are growing numbers of buyers who want meats produced without routine antibiotic use, and growing numbers of farmers who use husbandry practices that eliminate the need for routine antibiotics. Now we need to deal with the barriers that are keeping these two groups apart.”

Mark Walters has already identified other human health issues that could benefit for KAW-like partnerships. One example he offered is Lyme disease, carried by a tick that

is itself carried by mice and deer, two species common to forests. Sprawl (an environmental issue) puts more people in closer contact with forests and its denizens. The fragmentation of forests (a second environmental issue) drives out larger predators (an animal issue) that would normally control populations of deer and mice. Global warming (a third environmental issue) may be providing a friendlier breeding ground for the ticks. “You cannot effectively curb the spread of Lyme disease,” Walters said, “without addressing the environmental, animal, *and* human health issues together.”

Michael Lerner offered another reason why the emergence of coalitions similar to KAW would be valuable. “This kind of partnership strengthens NGOs by helping to reduce the power imbalance that’s inherent in their relationship with funders,” Lerner said. “It’s a legitimate transfer of both authority *and* responsibility.” While some foundations may talk about their grantees as “partners,” the funders behind KAW walked the talk—and Lerner believed this cut two ways. “The beauty of this model is that if one of the NGOs blows an assignment, it’s not just between the NGO and the foundations. It’s between the NGO and the rest of the coalition.” In short: “You’ve enormously heightened *accountability*.”

Nevertheless, funders wary of “mission creep” and losing focus may instinctively categorize the KAW story as a special case—insufficient evidence for stepping outside the carefully articulated guidelines of their respective programs. And as phrases such as “tangible outcomes” and “clear metrics” approach mantra status within the philanthropic community, funders may also be averse to such patently unmeasurable notions as “working with people you like.”

There is no disputing, however, that KAW’s holistic approach—both in terms of addressing an issue *and* deciding who will work together on it—has had real impact. Those who decide to emulate the KAW model may find it to be a “path of most resistance” within their own world. But Walters had a final thought for these individuals in particular. “Ecologists will tell you that it’s at the edge of habitats, not in the middle, where many of the most interesting processes occur,” he said. “The same could be said of philanthropy.” ◀

About the Author

ANDY GOODMAN

Andy Goodman wrote four stories of philanthropic innovation showcased on the Future of Philanthropy website, and advised the initiative at several crucial stages. He brings experience in advertising, radio, and television (where he wrote for the broadcast network sitcoms “Dinosaurs” and “The Nanny”) to his work as a nonprofit communications consultant and trainer. Based in Los Angeles, he specializes in helping public interest groups and foundations reach more people more effectively through print, broadcast media, and the Internet. Current clients include the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Environmental Defense, Global Business Network, Campaign for America’s Future, and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Andy publishes a monthly journal, “free-range thinking,” to share best practices in public interest communications, and is also author of the book, *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes*. He can be reached at andy@goodmanonline.com.

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