



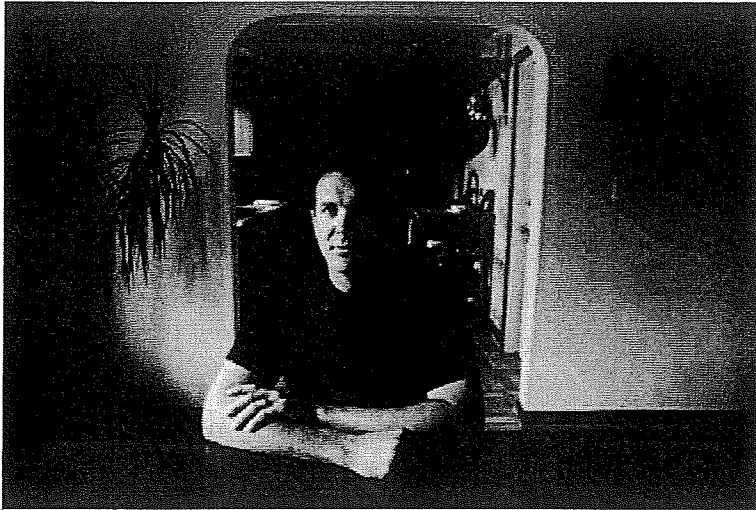
## Oregon health officials tackle complacency over antibiotic misuse, amid dire warnings

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In 2009, Scott Conrad's doctor said his diverticulitis had come back, and prescribed the usual antibiotics.



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Scott Conrad, a 42-year-old Portland engineer, thought he would die while fighting *C. diff*, a drug-resistant bacteria. Experts say antibiotic misuse makes the problem worse.

Michael Lloyd / The Oregonian

The pains in his abdomen stopped, but days later diarrhea started, and soon the Portland engineer couldn't leave the house. Doctors prescribed different drugs that didn't work, and Conrad stopped eating

Days passed, pounds dropped. "I thought I was dying," he recalls.

Unbeknownst to him, he'd been hit with *Clostridium difficile*, one of several increasingly powerful bacteria that have triggered global warnings that drug-resistant bugs are becoming a crisis that could cripple medicine as we know it.

It's been known for some time that over-prescribing antibiotics when they're not needed has led to the growth of "superbugs" that are extremely hard to treat.

As the October cold and flu season hits, Oregon officials are again spreading the word to hospitals, nursing homes, and above all, the public with appearances in schools, bill boards and radio ads.

Don't take antibiotics for the cold and flu. If you are prescribed antibiotics, follow the directions and don't share them. About half of ear infections are caused by viruses that are unaffected by antibiotics.

These simple messages are helping, but doctors, hospitals, the public and the state need to do better, officials say.

"We've been pretty successful," says Zintars Beldavs, a manager in the Oregon Public Health Division, but "we need to do more."

When bacteria survive a tussle with antibiotics, it makes them stronger. Drug resistance spreads, and it forces physicians to resort to stronger antibiotics.

Bacteria are adapting, however.

Drug-resistant bugs sicken 2 million in the U.S. annually with 23,000 deaths, federal health officials announced in September. The bug that Conrad battled, known as C. diff, kills 14,000 people a year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

But officials say the pipeline of new antibiotics looks nearly dry. And while antibiotics are overused in animal feed, superbugs' biggest ally has been health care itself – mainly hospitals, according to the CDC.

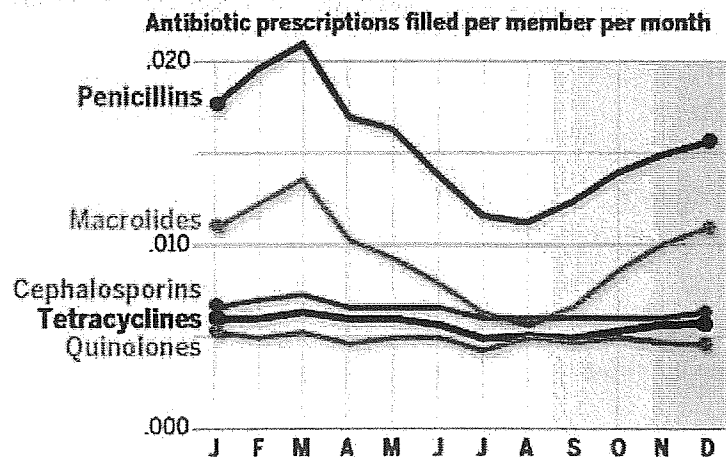
As much as half the antibiotics prescribed are unnecessary. Facilities and professionals over-prescribe them, sometimes because patients want them and sometimes because it is easy. They're misused for ear infections, low-level bugs and respiratory infections like the flu.

Robyn Liu, an Oregon Health & Science University family physician in Portland, says awareness is growing among her patients. But even among her fellow doctors, complacency dominates.

"It's very easy to prescribe an antibiotic and feel like you're giving the patients something for the effort they made to come to your office," she says. "I think that attitude is still prevalent."

### Monthly antibiotic use

Oregon officials used 2010-12 insurer data to track use of different antibiotics month by month. The winter jump in macrolides, such as azithromycin, suggests strong antibiotics are being over-prescribed, they say.



Source: Oregon Health Authority

DAN AGUAYO/THE OREGONIAN

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Scott Conrad is a living example.

In the depth of his illness, his wife, Amy, surfed the Internet for answers. Noting that his symptoms hit after an antibiotic dose, she fingered the culprit. C. diff. lies dormant until antibiotics wipe out beneficial bugs in the gastrointestinal system.

He asked his doctor for a simple stool sample. It confirmed his wife's theory, and soon Conrad's doctor delivered a potent "magic bullet" antibiotic called vancomycin. He felt better, but the punch line of his story still upsets him.

He never had diverticulitis in the first place, and he never needed the antibiotics

But then the father came back. He'd caught his son's illness, worked in sales and "didn't have time to mess with it."

Liu recalled, "I had probably spent four hours with this family trying to educate them, and I was worn out. At that point I gave in."

Officials say the world is nearing a "post-antibiotic era" where common medical procedures like surgeries and cancer treatment, that rely on antibiotics, could become far more hazardous.

Conrad believes it. He no longer accepts antibiotics without question. "My last doctor would throw antibiotics at sore throats and chest infections all the time. I've since learned to stay away from the doctor and battle through it myself."

And he's used the internet to track C. diff as it continue to grow stronger.

"My theory," he says. "They will eventually run out of different types of treatments and the C. diff will outsmart the medications."

--Nick Budnick

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that cleared the way for C. diff, his specialists concluded.

Pharmaceutical company marketing has sometimes contributed to the problem. Last year the Oregon Department of Justice settled a consumer protection lawsuit against Pfizer for \$3.3 million. The company had marketed Zyvox, a second generation antibiotic, for conditions for which a first-generation antibiotic would do, contributing to the problem of drug resistant bugs, DOJ had claimed.

More than \$600,000 went to the Oregon Health Authority and the Oregon Patient Safety Commission to fund an array of programs to improve the region's stewardship of antibiotics.

A survey of hospital workers found some good work, but suggested apathy and shortcomings, too:

- Of 309 doctors and pharmacists and others contacted for input on the program, only 138 replied.
- Only half of the state's hospitals appear to have full-blown stewardship programs to rein in the use of antibiotics.
- More than a quarter of respondents said the attitude of medical staff was an obstacle to reining in overuse of antibiotics.

So the state is offering trainings and expert consultations, with many hospitals joining the effort.

Diane Waldo of the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems says hospitals are doing their part to cut back on antibiotics. "Health care is the biggest (antibiotic) user, so we have to address it and address it as a team."

Officials are reaching out to nursing homes too. Long term care facilities, some of the worst offenders in over-prescribing antibiotics, have scant knowledge of the problem, let alone resources to deal with it, officials and experts say.

"The industry is not aware of it," says Pat Preston, a national nursing home consultant and based in Astoria who gives workshops on infectious disease control. "It's a real problem."

The group representing long-term care facilities, the Oregon Health Care Association defends its members' efforts. They are "in active partnership" with the state to improve practices, said Linda Kirschbaum,

The good news? Despite clear evidence that over-prescribing remains a problem here, Oregon uses fewer antibiotics than the majority of states. And dangerous drug-resistant bugs remain relatively rare here compared to, say New York, where the problem is endemic.

Liu, the Portland physician, says there's only so much a doctor can do, which is why public education is critical.

A couple of years ago she saw a four-year-old boy who basically had a cold. His parents kept asking for antibiotics and she kept telling them it was viral, antibiotics weren't called for, he'd get better. And he did.