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## Tainted honey from China tops FDA watch list

Andrew Schneider, Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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The United States imports most of its honey and for years China was the biggest supplier.

But in 1997, a contagious bacterial epidemic raced through hundreds of thousands of Chinese hives, infecting bee larvae and slashing the country's honey production by two-thirds.

Chinese beekeepers had two choices: They could destroy infected hives or apply antibiotics. They chose to do the latter.

That was a mistake, said Michael Burkett, a professor emeritus at Oregon State University and an internationally known authority on bees and honey.

"You hear about people shooting themselves in the foot? Well, the Chinese honey-sellers shot themselves in the head," he said.

The Chinese opted to use chloramphenicol, an inexpensive, broad-spectrum antibiotic that's so toxic it's used to treat only life-threatening infections in humans--and then only when other alternatives have been exhausted.

"That's on the big no-no list," Burkett said. "In the U.S., Canada and the European Union, chloramphenicol is on everyone's zero-tolerance list."

Now, 11 years later, some the honey buyers who take the trouble to test for it, still find the banned antibiotic in some of their imported honey.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says tainted honey from China is on top of its watch list and has been for six years--since the agency released the first of three "import alerts" targeted at banned substances in honey. FDA considers a food adulterated if, among other reasons, it contains an animal drug deemed unsafe for unapproved uses. Chloramphenicol certainly meets that definition.

In 2005, China's Ministry of Agriculture outlawed the use of chloramphenicol in food production, but there are reports that Chinese beekeepers are ignoring the ban.

Chloramphenicol is illegal for use in bees and other food-producing animals in the U.S. because it is impossible to determine a safe residue level, said Steve Roach, public health director of Keep Antibiotics Working, a Chicago-based group raising awareness about the hazards of antibiotics in

food.

"If the Chinese authorities are unable to keep this drug from being used, then no imports of honey from China should be allowed," Roach said.

Chloramphenicol has never been officially found in honey produced in the U.S. or Canada, and experts say honey containing traces of the antibiotic doesn't pose a health risk to most people.

While the FDA says chloramphenicol has been linked to aplastic anemia, a rare but serious blood disorder, other food-safety agencies point out that two teaspoons of honey laced with chloramphenicol residue contain less than one ten-millionth of a treatment dose of the antibiotic.

Most properly labeled honey warns against feeding it in any form to infants younger than 1 because studies have shown it can cause sometimes fatal botulism.

Many health practitioners, though, consider honey a minor miracle drug. As the world's oldest sweetener, the amber syrup has been heralded by grandmothers, nannies, nurses, tribal medicine men and physicians around the globe.

Hippocrates, the father of medicine, prescribed honey for its nutritional and pharmaceutical value.

The index of medical and scientific journals at the National Medical Library in Bethesda, Md., lists hundreds of studies exploring honey's value in treating, controlling or preventing diabetes, Alzheimer's, osteoporosis, stress, skin conditions, sexual problems and scores of other maladies.

Honey makes a natural antibacterial agent, in part because of its high sugar content and acidity, and many Third World countries still use it to treat burns and wounds.

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