Pharmacists resist panic demands for antibiotics
By Dorsey Griffith, Bee Medical Writer (Published Oct. 18, 2001)

Gary Thomas has angered a lot of callers the past few days, telling them he won't fill their prescriptions for large quantities of Cipro, the drug most commonly used against the potentially deadly anthrax bacteria.

"I can't let one or two patients take all of my current supply," the Sacramento pharmacist said. "We have two or three bottles of 100 pills each in our inventory for a drug that costs $400 a bottle. It's not something you would have 12 bottles of."

Instead, Thomas, of Land Park Leader Pharmacy, has told those looking for the drug that he will dispense 20 pills at a time, a 10-day supply. That's enough to combat most illnesses for which Cipro typically is prescribed, such as kidney and bladder infections. Anthrax infections require a 60-day regimen of Cipro.

"What we know is there are a lot of prescriptions being written and dispensed for (preventive) supplies of Cipro. This is very distressing," said Carlo Michelotti, CEO of the California Pharmacists Association. "People are going to get themselves hurt." The group plans to host a press conference next week to air its concerns.

The role of the pharmacist has become more challenging with anthrax scares cropping up around the country, as jittery people have persuaded their doctors to prescribe the drug as a precaution.

In response, pharmacists are being extra cautious about dispensing Cipro. Any antibiotic -- even when used for a diagnosed illness -- can fuel the creation of resistant bugs that make treating infections more difficult. And using them indiscriminately can exacerbate that process.

Pharmacists also want to ensure there are adequate supplies for legitimate needs and to prevent unnecessary adverse reactions to the drug.
Chet Yee, a pharmacist in San Mateo County, has written a newsletter outlining his concerns. He said he has limited prescriptions to 30 tablets per person, and cautioned that Cipro should not be given to infants or children because it can cause arthritis-type problems. He is asking those who want the drug for children for a signed release from the prescribing physician.

"I am afraid that if there is Cipro in a household, families will be tempted to use the antibiotic for any illness that comes up before any anthrax emergency," he warned in the newsletter. "If adverse effects develop, your dispensing and furnishing of this drug will be questioned in a court of law."

Thomas, the Land Park pharmacist, said many people without symptoms have asked him to fill prescriptions for Cipro, including one who wanted to pay cash for 60 pills for herself and 60 for her husband. Another caller, from Bodega Bay, wanted 80 pills -- 20 for each person in his family. "I told her I could only give her 20."

Michelotti said pharmacists have the legal right to adjust a prescription -- with the permission of the prescribing doctor. "Pharmacists have the professional prerogative to challenge," he said.

Doctors who give in to demands for Cipro from patients without symptoms do so against the recommendations of the national Centers for Disease Control and many other medical groups. They probably are doing so to calm irrational fears, doctors said.

"Unless you have truly been neurotic, it's hard for any of us to understand these patients," said Dr. David Herbert, an infectious disease specialist at Kaiser Permanente in Sacramento and Roseville. Herbert told of a doctor in San Francisco who finally prescribed the drug to a patient after the man harangued him repeatedly, claiming he had to have it to combat "the inevitable emergency."

That is not a practice Herbert recommends at Kaiser. "We have sent out multiple messages to physicians both electronically and in writing that it is a bad idea," he said. "I think most doctors are hearing that, and I think most patients are willing to be educated."

The public health stakes are high, experts said. First, antibiotics can make you sick, said Dr. Glennah Trochet, a Sacramento County health officer. An allergic reaction to Cipro,
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In rare cases, it can cause shock. More commonly, it causes diarrhea, rashes or nausea.

Use of antibiotics also can cause bacteria to become resistant to the very drug designed to kill it.

Dr. Dean Blumberg is an infectious disease specialist at UC Davis Medical Center who is active in a statewide effort to quell inappropriate use of antibiotics.

All people have many bacteria in and on their bodies, he said. Antibiotics are designed to kill bacteria. But not all bacteria will be killed by an antibiotic. Some, when under attack, will defend themselves by becoming resistant to that drug. So, when the person gets sick again, the antibiotic may not be effective.

"Instead of using the first-line antibiotics, which may be easier to administer and have fewer side effects, you have to go the second-line agents, which may have more side effects."

He added that resistant bacteria can spread from person to person through kissing, hand-shaking and other ordinary contacts.

"The message is not to scare people away from taking (antibiotics) when they need them. In that case, the benefit outweighs these theoretical risks," Blumberg said.

"If there are no anticipated benefits, all you are left with are the risks."

The Bee's Dorsey Griffith can be reached at (916) 321-1089 or dgriffith@sacbee.com.

90 MINUTE S
WRITE IN A BLUE BOOK

QUESTION: YOUR “MOTHER” HAS BEEN WATCHING THE NEWS ON TV AND HAS BECOME PETRIFIED WITH FEAR AND IS CONVINCED SHE IS GOING TO BE POISONED BY TERRORISTS. SO SHE HAS ASKED YOU TO GET HER A SIX-
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MONTH SUPPLY OF ANTIBIOTICS SO SHE CAN START TAKING THEM.

BASED UPON THIS ONE ARTICLE BY GRIFFITH, WOULD YOU BUY THE MEDICATION FOR YOUR MOTHER OR WOULD YOU REFUSE?