A Broader Scale

I REMEMBER WORKING AS A DOCTOR ON AN AIDS WARD, watching people disintegrate before my eyes and wondering where this disease originated. I was surprised to learn that the AIDS virus may have begun in chimpanzees before being transferred into the human population through the butchering of primates for bush meat in Africa.

In fact, most of humanity’s greatest killers—including smallpox, tuberculosis, and measles—seem to have originally come from domesticated animals raised for slaughter. And with the intensification of animal agriculture over the past few decades, new diseases have emerged from the animal world at an unprecedented rate. We have no cure for many of them—such as AIDS, mad cow disease, and antibiotic-resistant super bugs—but we know with certainty that we need to stop them from emerging in the first place by targeting the source: the human-animal interface. That’s why I came to work for The HSUS.

Much of the blame for these emerging diseases can be laid at the doorstep of industrial animal agriculture, which in the United States alone confines 10 billion animals inside filthy factory farms or degraded feedlots to live atop their own waste, a veritable breeding ground for disease.

Before factory farming, our grandparents as children could eat raw cookie dough with little fear of Salmonella. Before factory farming, people could cook sunny-side up eggs with runny yolks without much worry over contracting a multidrug-resistant infection. There used to be no such thing as E. coli 0157:H7, and our burgers could be as pink inside as we wanted without fear that our children would wind up in the hospital.

What’s best for animal health is often best for human health. When birds are crammed into cages so small they can’t even spread their wings, when mother pigs are locked into metal crates so narrow they can’t even turn around, when calves are forced to live chained by their necks in the darkness of veal farms—the stress of prolonged confinement compromises their welfare as well as their immune systems, making them more susceptible to pathogens they can then transfer to consumers. Some of these animals live in such squalor that they are routinely fed antibiotics to assist them to slaughter weight, a practice that may leave antibiotic residues that foster resistance among human germs, making it more difficult for us to treat patients. No wonder the American Public Health Association is calling for a moratorium on the building of any more factory farms in the United States.

Now, with avian flu threatening to trigger a pandemic that could potentially touch millions of Americans, never before has it been more important to look critically at modern intensive animal agriculture. And that’s what I work toward every day. I’m still practicing medicine at The HSUS—just on a broader scale.

—Michael Greger, M.D., Director, Public Health and Animal Agriculture, Farm Animal Welfare

Combating Animal Fighting and Cruelty

Several important animal fighting busts occurred during the year thanks in large part to our help. We participated in the raid of the Louisiana “Godfather” of dogfighting, Floyd Boudreaux, with the Louisiana SPCA and law enforcement officials that resulted in the seizure of 59 dogs and 57 counts of cruelty filed against Boudreaux and his son. Our staff also helped the FBI, Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) raid one of the country’s largest illegal cockfighting pits; 144 participants were arrested, and more than 300 birds were seized. And a second large pit in Tennessee closed when the FBI announced it was going to seize the property. We helped police in an Iowa municipality raid two suspected cockfighting properties; 40 birds were seized and one suspect was convicted of felony cockfighting and narcotics violations. We also joined a sheriff’s office in the state in a cockfighting raid during which two suspects were arrested and 13 birds