Ann Arbor News "Your World" Submission for 5-22-06

Mary Eley, Executive Director of the Michigan Antibiotics Resistance Reduction Coalition (MARR), will be in Ann Arbor speaking about antibiotics resistance and the environmental impacts of pharmaceutical waste this Thursday, May 25th from 5:30-6:30 p.m. at the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, located at 1819 S. Wagner Road.

MARR is responsible for implementing the Michigan Antibiotics Roundup Pilot Project. The first of its kind tried nationally, this event collected old and unused antibiotics at 86 Meijer Pharmacies statewide from January 25th to April 25th, 2006. Before the Roundup event began, a Harris Interactive survey found that almost a quarter of Michigan residents inadvertently misuse antibiotics by 1) taking them for viral, instead of bacterial infections, or 2) not taking the fully prescribed dosage, which kills off only the weakest bacteria, allowing the strong to survive. Both of these practices allow bacteria to emerge with strengthened resistance to our most commonly used antibiotics, potentially rendering them ineffective.

The concern of antibiotic resistance grows as we consider what percentage of our pharmaceutical waste finds its way through wastewater treatment plants and into our fresh water. A recent U.S. Geological Survey study found that 80% of 139 streams sampled nationwide contained low concentrations of one or more chemicals, including human and veterinary drugs (including antibiotics), natural and synthetic hormones, and insecticides, among others. Although unused and expired medications have traditionally been flushed down the toilet, the potential for these chemicals to cause unintended health effects in aquatic wildlife and humans is far too great for this practice to continue.

Unfortunately, federal regulations prohibit home toxics collection programs from receiving leftover medications. So please follow these steps for proper pharmaceutical disposal:

Seal your containers liberally with duct tape and bag them in multiple layers of securely closed plastic grocery bags. These measures prevent the contents of the bag from being identified, and from opening and spilling out during compaction in the trash truck or disposal in the landfill. And of course, discard in your garbage container, not your recycling bin!

Many people are reluctant to put old meds in their trash, for fear they will leach through the landfill into our groundwater. But modern landfills have liners, and the leachate within is collected and sent to a treatment plant for removal of the harmful compounds. So remember, seal, conceal, wrap and trash.

Please visit www.mi-marr.org for more information on MARR and the Antibiotic Roundup Program or call 734-222-6874 for further information about the event. This talk is sponsored by the Washtenaw County Consortium for Solid Waste Management.

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