



# Our Hen House

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## Interview with Aysha Akhtar

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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Following is a transcript of an interview with **AYSHA AKHTAR** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 208.

JASMIN: I'm so excited about today's interview. Dr. Aysha Akhtar is a neurologist and a public health specialist, and she has an expertise in public health. And she's going to talk to us about the public health implications of our mistreatment of animals. So, this is definitely a subject we have not explored on Our Hen House nearly enough, and I think we really are bringing you the best of the best to explore it with us, so I'm excited that you get to hear today from Dr. Aysha Akhtar.

Aysha Akhtar, M.D., M.P.H., is a neurologist and public health specialist and is the author of *Animals and Public Health: Why Treating Animals Better Is Critical to Human Welfare*, which examines how the treatment of animals impacts human health. From infectious disease epidemics to domestic violence, the health consequences of factory farming and the effectiveness and safety of medical research, this book reveals how many of our most urgent and pressing public health threats are connected with the poor treatment of animals. Dr. Akhtar is also a fellow of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, and works for the Office of Counterterrorism and Emerging Threats of the US Food and Drug Administration. She is published in peer-reviewed journals, has been interviewed by major news media, and is a regular blogger for the Huffington Post. She lives outside Washington, D.C. with her husband Patrick and their ornery feline, Silos. Find Aysha Akhtar on the Huffington Post at [huffingtonpost.com/aysha-akhtar](http://huffingtonpost.com/aysha-akhtar).

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Welcome to Our Hen House, Aysha.

AYSHA: Thank you, I'm so happy to be here.

JASMIN: We're so excited to talk to you today, and before we jump in, I just want our listeners to know that the opinions that Aysha will be sharing are her own, and not those of anyone else's or any other company or organization, so I wanted to get that out there. And that being said, what is the basic premise of your new book, *Animals and Public Health*?

AYSHA: Thanks for asking that. There's a tendency among many folks, and at least I've found in my lifetime and especially among the other people that I work with in public health and medicine, to think that we can either help animals or help humans and we can't do both. And so, I have found that in actuality, the opposite is true. Not only can we help

humans and animals, but in order to help humans best, we have to also protect animals from suffering. And so, throughout my medical career I kind of went on this journey of discovery, and the book is the culmination of that discovery, in which I have found so much evidence, the research is really pointing out to the fact that a lot of our major public health problems that we face today are a result, at least indirectly if not in many cases directly, of how we treat animals.

MARIANN: I just find that a fascinating premise, and partly because it puts into very real terms something very visionary, that there really can be a better way to live in the world, and that it all makes sense, and it makes sense scientifically. Before we proceed, could you -- your book covers a lot of different issues which not everybody would put together into the same place, and that's because they all have to do with public health. Can you talk a little bit about what is public health, how you would define it, and what aspects of human wellbeing you're looking at when you look at public health issues?

AYSHA: Sure. So, public health technically means the health of a population, so we're not talking about one-on-one care of a patient-doctor necessarily; we're talking about the health of our country or another country or a city or the world. So, we're really -- we're just looking at human beings basically. And there are a lot of aspects of public health, and in my book, I'm showing how the wildlife trade, in which we rip animals from their natural habitat to ship them around the globe just so we can use them as decorations on our clothes and our handbags and to use them as exotic pets and for entertainment in circuses, how that actually leads to the emergence and spread of some major infectious disease that are causing us a lot of harm and causing a lot of people to suffer. For example, the wildlife trade is behind the emergence and spread of SARS, of HIV, of Ebola, and there's a lot of human beings that have suffered as a result of the wildlife trade in addition to the suffering that those animals experience.

Then there's also the connection between what we eat and how the animals are treated in industrial animal agriculture practices, now factory farms, the term we tend to use, and our ridiculously high rates of obesity, strokes, chronic diseases like cancers and diabetes, and also how the factory farming industry contributes to poisoning our planet and contributes to other infectious diseases, even, like the wildlife trade. Factory farms are great at not only spewing out cheap meat, eggs, and dairy products, but also new viruses and bacteria that make us sick.

JASMIN: Mm, yeah. Many animal rights advocates are all over the arguments about how eating meat is harming people. But when it comes to animal experimentation, they're not so sure that that's true. Why is animal experimentation bad for people?

AYSHA: Oh, I'm glad you brought that up because that's actually the other topic in my book that I go into. I'm a neurologist and I've been involved in studying what are the best techniques just to understand human biology and disease. I work at the FDA. I'm connected with the folks who are doing animal experiments. And everything that I have come to learn - - and it's not just me but it's a growing number of scientists -- is that animal experiments are so outdated. They are so part of the old way of looking at things. It may have been enough at one point to use another animal, to use a monkey or a rat to figure out some very basic aspects of biology, of human biology, but we're well past that now. We're now looking at the subtle mechanisms in our physiology. And at that point, there's a lot of differences in those mechanisms from between different species, from other animals to humans. And so, the

evidence is just overwhelmingly pointing to the fact that animal experiments today, not only are not the best way to study human disease; they actually prevent us from finding effective cures.

MARIANN: So, assuming that the effectiveness of animal experimentation is diminished because there are so many better advances right now and because there are so many better ways to go forward, why is there still so much of it?

AYSHA: Yeah. So, let me give you a good story that may explain why there's such a blind spot with this. At one point not too long ago, I was in a room with a lot of high-profile scientists, very what would be considered top-notch scientists in our government agencies, and we were discussing a chemical and its effects on different species. So, the group was talking about the LD50, which is the lethal dose 50 test. And I know a lot of people have heard of it, but for those who haven't, it's basically a test in which you give a test chemical or drug at increasing rates to an animal until 50% of that population of animals die. You may give it by pouring it into their eyes; you may give it by forcing them to inhale the product; you may give it intravenously or force it down their throats. So, that's the lethal dose 50 test. Now, we know that that test is absolutely horrible at predicting how these chemicals are gonna work in humans or what their effects are gonna be in humans. We know that. There is so much evidence that shows that the LD50 is so poor at predicting human outcomes.

So, when I was in this room with this group of scientists, I brought this up. And I asked, I said, "We know that the LD50 is absolutely unreliable, isn't that correct?" And of course, everyone's heads nod in agreement with me. And then I asked, "So then, why are we continuing to do these tests?" And the room went absolutely silent. No one could even think of an answer. And that just is one example of how there is this collective blind spot among the very people that we depend on to best protect our health. And it's not just necessarily that they're cruel people; I think a lot of people just have not really critically examined the use of animal experiments. But I will say that is changing, and as I said before, there's a growing number of scientists who are becoming more and more outspoken against animal experiments and they're saying, "hey, not only is this a bad way to do tests, to figure out what's going on in the human body, but we can actually come up with much better ways, and here are the other ways."

MARIANN: Well, I sure hope you're right, 'cause it just seems crazy that it keeps going on and on. It's somehow disheartening to the rest of us that scientists get caught in the same mindless ruts that the rest of us do about thinking about the world because they're not supposed to, but of course they do. Another public health concern, of course, that you mentioned before, is infectious disease. And can you tell us a little bit more? You gave us an intro, but can you tell us a little bit more about how our treatment of animals relates to the prevalence of infectious diseases?

AYSHA: Sure! I can give you -- let me give you one example. I also work in the Office of Counterterrorism and Emerging Threats, and one of the things we're constantly looking out for is the new virus that may cause the next major pandemic. And so everyone has heard about bird flu and swine flu. What most people don't really realize is that factory farming is one of the major contributors to the transformation of these influenza viruses that cause them to become more lethal and more contagious and more likely to sicken us.

When you look at a factory farm, you've got a double whammy in the sense that you have really densely packed animals -- they're so crowded it's ridiculous. And because of their conditions, they're so miserable that their immune systems are down. So, they're unable to fight off or less able to fight off infections. So, you combine the fact that you've got animals whose immune systems are down because they're so depressed and so stressed, with the fact that they're so crowded. Once you introduce a virus, which happens very easily in a factory farm environment, into the setting, it can be spread from one animal to another animal like wildfire. Each time a virus is passed along from one animal to another, it brings us closer to having a pandemic because it gives that virus a greater ability to acquire the best traits that make it more deadly for us.

JASMIN: Is this an issue that's growing?

AYSHA: Absolutely. As factory farms are becoming the norm throughout the world, this is definitely an issue that's growing. While World War I was winding down, we had the worst pandemic so far that we've ever faced, which was called the 1918 or Spanish Influenza Pandemic. That was called "the mother of all pandemics." And it killed more people than all the great major wars of the 20th century combined. And as long as we continue to do what we're doing to animals, as long as we continue to treat them as nothing more than commodities and tools in these farms, it is only a matter of time before not only are we faced with the mother of all pandemics again, necessarily, but before we're faced with the mother-in-law of all pandemics.

JASMIN: Yeah. What other public health issues are related to factory farming?

AYSHA: Oh gosh, there's so many. I mean, I could go on and on. I could turn it around and say, "What public health issue is *not* related to factory farming?" So, we have infectious diseases, we have growing antibiotic resistance. And a lot of people read about this daily. The FDA just came out with this announcement that they were going to ask the pharmaceutical companies to voluntarily change their label so that factory farmers and these industries don't keep pumping animals with their antibiotic. There's a big loophole in the FDA's announcement though, or in their plan, in it still allows for the industry to continue to pump animals with low levels of antibiotics if they want to claim that they're being used to prevent the animals from getting sick. And as long as we continue to pump these antibiotics, we're producing superbugs and bacteria which are resistant to the very antibiotics that we depend on to combat them.

MARIANN: That whole rationale just makes me crazy, as if, what is wrong with the scenario that anybody, human or animal, is living in conditions that they would need to be pumped full of antibiotics to prevent getting sick? There's just something wrong with the whole premise. If you need antibiotics to prevent you from getting sick, something is wrong with the way you're living. Another thing you talk about is the effects of animal agriculture actually on the healthfulness of the food that vegans eat, such as fruits and vegetables. Can you explain that?

AYSHA: Yeah, so this goes back also to infectious diseases. So, there are -- besides actually causing the next pandemic, which I think is very likely, factory farms can infect us by two other ways. One is through the meat that we eat directly if you eat meat and animal products. So, there was a recent study by the University of Minnesota that found that over 90% of the chicken products in the grocery store -- these are the products that are already

packaged all nicely in the grocery store -- are teeming with bacteria. And the rate is very high for pork and beef products as well. So, if you're eating animal products, chances are you're eating products that are just teeming with bacteria.

The other way you can get these infectious diseases is when the manure that's produced on these factory farms are spread over our crops. So, when you think about it, manure used to be a good thing. Actually, in very small doses, it can be a good thing! It can be good for our crops, it can nourish them. But now we have so many animals that are being produced in factory farms, 70 billion. And think about that; that means that for every human being on this planet right now, there are about 10 animals being raised and killed for food at any one time. So, we have so many animals being raised and killed for food, we have too much manure. We don't know what to do with it. So, the industry's answer to this is to spray the manure like a liquid goo over our crops. And so, that contaminates our spinach with the bacteria because bacteria thrives in manure.

JASMIN: How about climate change?

AYSHA: Climate change, yeah. Here again, we've got factory farming that we can blame for another major problem that, if it hasn't caused any major public health issues yet, it's going to. Factory farming or animal agriculture is the number one contributor to the greenhouse gases that we know. It contributes more to greenhouse gases than any other industry including the entire transportation industry. Factory farming is one of the major polluters of our rivers, of our lakes, of our streams. It poisons our water and poisons our air. And so for many reasons, factory farming is such a threat to our health. And as we know, it's such a threat to animals. It causes so much suffering.

JASMIN: Aysha, you also talk about some of the public health concerns arising from the increasing use and abuse of exotic animals. Can you explain?

AYSHA: Mm-hm. Sure. This goes back to the wildlife trade. So, every year, millions of animals are either caught from the wild or they're bred in captivity, and they're either killed on site or they're shipped around and passed from handler to handler around the globe so that we can use them to decorate our clothing or to use them as exotic pets or to have them entertain for us in circuses and zoos or to use them for experimentation, or to use them as medicinal objects. Snakes are caught and skinned alive so that we can decorate our own shoes with their skin.

And one of the major problems associated with this trade is that each time we go in deeper and deeper into the forest to catch these animals, either to stock the breeding farms or to direct them around the globe, as we do this, as we delve deeper into the forest, we are inviting new pathogens to jump into the human species that we've never encountered before. We suspect that the reason why we encountered HIV is through the bush meat trade, in which African monkeys, nonhuman primates, and other animals such as wild boar and antelopes, were caught from the African bush, and traded as exotic meat. And this is also the contributing cause behind Ebola.

Now, SARS came about a little bit differently. SARS was the virus that emerged in China in the Guangdong province. And at the time, when it was first noted and it was first starting to really start causing people to fall ill, really quite drastically, there was concern that the root of SARS could be traced back to the animals called civet cats, they're kind of catlike

creatures. And they're caught for the wildlife trade for their musk-producing glands, but they're victims of the wildlife trade. And actually what we found is that they are most likely not the root cause of SARS, but the SARS virus, the origin of it, can probably be traced back to a type of fruit bat, who are also victims of the wildlife trade. They were caught and shipped around the globe as well. And we suspect that at some point in the wildlife trade, these fruit bats were in contact with civet cats, civet cats who again -- their immune systems were depressed because they were living in such miserable conditions, so it was easy for them to catch SARS from the bats, and then it was easy for them to pass it onto other animals and ultimately to humans. So, this is one example of how the wildlife trade directly caused the emergence and spread of this new virus that we had never encountered before that killed hundreds of thousands of people.

MARIANN: I think one of the most fascinating things about your book is that it is this kind of overview of all of these different issues, and it lets you see them in this global way that it's our exploitation of animals that contributes to all of these problems. And they're really all the same problem in some way, although we tend to categorize them very separately. One of the things I thought was particularly interesting is that you talk about issues specifically related to violence, violence in general, and more specifically domestic violence. Can you explain?

AYSHA: Yeah, so we already know that there's a clear connection between interpersonal violence, whether it's domestic violence or abuse of children or other forms of violence, and cruelty against animals. How that connection comes about we don't quite know, but we do know that if you were to see, for example, a dog being abused, chances are a child in that house is also being abused. In fact, the abuse of animals is one of the highest indicators that there is violence in the family setting. We know that. What we don't know is why. We don't know, does abuse of other animals cause people to then go on and abuse other humans, or is it just that people who abuse one just are more likely to abuse the other just because they have a general lack of consideration for the other creature's wellbeing, whether they're humans or other animals? But the connection is very strong. It's one of the strongest connections we have actually in domestic violence situations. Part of the problem is that our public health agencies haven't really recognized this connection though. They kind of give lip service to it. If you go to the WHO or the CDC websites and look up domestic violence, you'll be hard-pressed to find any suggestion or any discussion in how domestic violence links with the abuse of other animals. And that's a real problem. If we can't recognize this connection, we won't be able to really get to the root of the problem.

MARIANN: How about other issues, all of the other issues you're talking about? The facts you've talked about regarding everything seem really kind of obvious in a lot of ways, and yet as you point out, animals and their welfare have actually been left out of the public health conversation. In areas besides domestic violence, do you see that changing? Is there an emerging consciousness?

AYSHA: There is, slightly and very slowly, an emerging consciousness, at least when it comes to the association and the connection between factory farming and the consuming of animals and our own health, and the destruction of our environment. So, in that sense, the connection is growing. There is, as I've also mentioned before, a growing awareness that animal experiments, while also causing tremendous suffering in animals, is also causing a lot of suffering in humans because they're just bad tests. They're not helpful for us to find

the cures that we so desperately seek. So, in those areas, the awareness is starting to grow, but overall it really is a very – there really is a blind spot on the part of public health and medical folks in understanding this connection in general between humans and animals.

MARIANN: So, what are some of the issues that you think advocates should work on or focus on that there is a potential for a shift that could have a major impact on animals?

AYSHA: So, we're starting to see the shift, at least in the public, in the views in regards to factory farming. But I also think there's real room now for us to really get onto the issue of animal experiments. We're sort of at a turning point in regards to animal experiments. And I've been involved in this issue since I was in high school, and when I first said to my high school teacher that I wasn't going to dissect animals for my biology class. And I've been involved in the issue throughout my medical career, when I was a medical student and then a resident and ultimately now out and in the government and part of the very, the institutions that are involved in animal experimentation. And what I can say is that I can actually see that the tide is starting to turn in the issue of animal experiments. There are more people now who are opposed to animal experimentation than ever before. The number is especially growing among the younger adults. We don't know why there are more people who are more opposed, if it's just ethical, if it's because they're aware of the scientific problems with animal experimentation, or if it's both, but the fact remains that there are more people opposed than ever before.

At the same time, we're having more scientists jump on the bandwagon to produce and create these amazing new testing methods that we didn't have 10 or 20 years ago. We now have companies that are producing these cutting edge techniques like human lungs on a chip, human organs on a chip, which I guarantee are gonna be far more predictive of human outcomes than animal experiments could ever be. So, we're seeing this combination of a growing opposition in the public, and growing awareness among the scientific community to not only stop doing animal experiments but find better techniques. And what we need to do as activists is jump on this bandwagon, and we need to help make it go faster and make it rise higher. So, we need more confident activists to speak out against animal experiments than ever before. This is a real opportunity for us that we don't want to miss.

JASMIN: Totally agreed. Tell us about your work with the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics.

AYSHA: Sure. I love the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, and one of the directors, or the director, is Andrew Linzey, who's a reverend. I actually met him when I was 17 years old. He was here visiting the United States at that time and I was a kid, I was in high school, and I went to go hear him talk about religion and animals. And I was so impressed, had him over at my parents' house for dinner that night. And I was out of contact with Andrew for so long until we hooked up again when I learned about the Oxford Centre, and I'm so proud to be part of that, the Oxford Centre. It's such a wonderful institution. And it's basically an institution where academics and scientists like myself can get together, we can exchange ideas in a platform that's open and sharing. And it's producing some great work. And it's highlighting the fact that there's a changing paradigm in how we view animals, in that there are more and more academics and more thinkers are addressing the issue of our relationship with animals, and the Oxford Centre is at the heart of it.

JASMIN: Well, and you're at the heart of so much important work that is happening behind closed doors. I'm just so glad, I'm so grateful that you shared all of these insights with us today, Dr. Akhtar. And we are so grateful to you for all of the work you're doing with your new book, *Animals and Public Health*. And this was really eye-opening, so thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House, and letting us in on what's going on. I agree with you. This is an important opportunity for anyone who wants to see a new world for animals to get involved. And your work is really providing us with the tools and the knowledge that we need to do that, so thank you so much and happy New Year, and I look forward to hearing about everything you do in 2014 and beyond.

AYSHA: Thank you, and I can say the same thing about the Our Hen House. I'm so glad you guys are out there having this new platform. It's terrific.

JASMIN: Thank you.

That was Dr. Aysha Akhtar.