The use of pharmaceutical hormones has been approved for use in beef cattle by both Canadian and American policy makers, but their safety and necessity in the production of beef has been questioned. Beef marketed as "free of added hormones and antibiotics" has spurred debates across the nation: Is this truly better beef? What are added hormones doing in my food?

Many hormones and their derivatives do indeed have a place in the production of beef and in maintaining the general health of the herd. Oxytocin, Dexamethasone, Dinoprost (Lutalyse), and Cloprostenol (Estrumate) are just a few examples of pharmaceutical hormones which are used to promote herd health and welfare, but these commonly used medicines are not the hormones that the consumers have become concerned about.

Six hormones have been approved for use as growth promoters within the beef industry in Canada and have been in the spotlight recently. Progesterone, testosterone, estradiol, trenbolone acetate (TBA), zeranol, and melengestrol acetate (MGA) are all used in varying combinations in the form of implants in cattle ears or as a feed additive. These growth promotants are labelled to increase feed efficiency while producing a leaner end product. Maximizing their use should aid in lower producer cost and keep the cost to the consumer reasonable as well.

These growth promoters are absorbed through the tissue or the gastrointestinal tract and levels accumulate in the body, until the liver metabolizes and eliminates its derivatives. Stringent tests carried out by Health Canada, the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations have ensured the use of these products to be safe for the animals and also for human consumption once adequate withdrawal times are observed.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency carries out residue testing in all beef produced here and imported for Canadian consumption. While all animal products will contain low levels of natural hormones, a zero tolerance for synthetic hormone residues exists in Canada. The natural hormones that do remain in beef are in fact significantly lower when compared to other animal commodities. On average, a 100 gram steak from an animal exposed to growth promoting hormones has 2.2 nano grams (ng) of estrogen, while a 250 mL glass of milk has 35.9 ng — and both are within the acceptable limits for human consumption.
Canadians are consuming 27.4 kg of meat per capita and we have become the fifth largest exporter of beef in the world. In order to keep this up we need to promote health and efficiency into our systems. If hormone growth promoters are going to be used, respect withdrawal times and educate the public on their use and safety within our food system. Ignorance has been manipulated into fear when it comes to hormone use in the beef industry and it's time to take a stand. Right now we need to support marketers of Canadian beef because we know it's safely produced, delicious on the plate and we are proud of our industry!