ROUNDTABLE REPORT

What policies and actions are needed to dramatically reduce farm antibiotic use?

A roundtable event, hosted by the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics in partnership with the Food Research Collaboration at City University

Wednesday 29th June 2016, City University
ROUNDTABLE AIMS

On 29th June a group of experts attended a roundtable event co-hosted by the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics and the Food Research Collaboration at City University, and chaired by Professor Tim Lang. Participants consisted of 26 representatives from organic and non-organic livestock and veterinary industries, civil society organisations, retail and foodservice sectors, and policy and health actors.

Within the context of the need to dramatically reduce farm-antibiotic use - in order to safeguard human, animal and ecosystem health - the event aimed to identify the major barriers blocking progress and the policies and practices required to overcome these.

PARTICIPANTS

Javier Dominguez, Veterinary Director - Food Standards Agency
Peter Plate DrMedVet MRCVS - Endell Veterinary Group
Gwen Rees BVSc (Hons) MRCVS MVCNZ - PhD Scholar in Clinical Veterinary Science, Honorary Teaching Fellow in Farm Animal Population Medicine, University of Bristol
Dr Georgina Crayford, Senior Policy Adviser - National Pig Association
Daniel Parker, Veterinary Adviser - British Poultry Council
David Finlay, Managing Director - Cream o’ Galloway
Howard Revell, Chair - Responsible Health Group for Waitrose Farming Partnership
Sophie Stoye - Eastbrook Farm
Steve Eldridge, Policy Advisor & Communications and Outreach - Veterinary Medicines Directorate
Gwyn Jones, Chairman - RUMA
Peter Melchett, Policy Director - Soil Association
John Isherwood, Head of Sustainability - Pret-A-Manger
Geraldine Gilbert, Principal Sustainability Advisor - Forum for the Future
Richard Young, Policy Director - Sustainable Food Trust
Dr Angela Wright, Head of Science & Education - Compassion in World Farming
Georgia Farnworth, Policy Officer - Soil Association
Phil Hambling, Agriculture Manager - Sainsburys
Coilin Nunan, Scientific Advisor - Alliance to Save our Antibiotics
Emma Rose, Co-ordinator - Alliance to Save our Antibiotics
Prof Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy - Centre for Food Policy, City University
Dr Victoria Schoen, Research Fellow - City University
Mary Atkinson, Network Co-ordinator - City University
Dr David McCoy, Director - Medact
Haydn Evans - Parceithin Farm
Anna Glayzer, Advocacy manager - Consumers International
Andrew Wasley – Bureau of Investigative Journalism
CONTEXT

There is mounting concern amongst policy-makers and the public about the human-health risks of high levels of antibiotic use in farming, particularly in poultry and pig production.

The link between antibiotic use in livestock farming and antimicrobial resistance in human infections has confirmed by numerous independent reviews, most recently by the O’Neill Review appointed by the Prime Minister David Cameron, and the veterinary and farming sectors have now accepted the need to reduce their use of antibiotics in order to help protect these medicines for the future.

Increasing media attention, public pressure and and the likelihood of new regulatory restrictions being introduced as European veterinary medicines legislation is currently being revised, are all also factors encouraging the industry to revise their current practices.

However, we are yet to see real action on a scale commensurate with the magnitude of the antimicrobial-resistance crisis.

More needs to be done, and livestock farming systems now face the challenge of how to move beyond routine antibiotic use towards health-orientated systems for rearing livestock. The kind of shift required is a systemic one - which may necessitate a redefinition of the optimal levels of animal welfare, productivity and farm management.

While much can be achieved through the application of existing measures and expertise, the Alliance believes that implementation of new regulation and policies are needed which provide incentives for best practice and increases pressure on global trade partners to adopt similar regulatory measures.

The UK Government says it is opposed to the routine, purely preventative mass-medication of animals, but at the same time says it has “no plans to significantly revise” veterinary medicines regulations until the current EU reviews of the legal framework for veterinary medicinal products are complete. With the UK now set to leave the European Union, it is even more imperative that we see ambitious unilateral action from the UK Government to reduce the farm use of antibiotics, in line with actions already taken in the Netherlands and the Nordic countries.

However, the imposition of market-led changes and regulatory measures on their own will not be sufficient. Such measures must be applied in tandem, education and knowledge exchange between livestock farmers and veterinarians, and benchmarking of consumption on different farms and perhaps also different veterinary practices.

Food retailers must also exert pressure on supply chains to improve prescribing - as well as providing favourable trading conditions that allow improvements to be made in practice. Assurance schemes and certification bodies can also play an important role in recognising and rewarding progress and transparency, and in providing consumers with the reassurance they are looking for.

Crucially, farmers and vets must be at the forefront of the drive to reduce and improve antibiotic use, and must lead the way in identifying the practices which can help achieve these goals.
DISCUSSION

The discussion took place under Chatham House rules, and within the context of the Alliance’s two main policy asks:

- An EU-wide ban on routine prophylactic antibiotic use in groups of animals (before disease diagnosis in any of the animals)
- Reductions to farm-use of the ‘Critically Important’ antibiotics (CIAs), including a ban on all preventative use of CIAs, a ban on all group treatment with CIAs and a ban on off-label use.

The discussion focused on three main questions.

1) **What are the pioneering practices that we must adopt to move beyond routine antibiotic use and dramatically cut farm-use of the ‘critically important’ antibiotics?**

2) **How do we promote widespread uptake of these practices within the livestock/veterinary industries?**

3) **How do we ensure that new practices are sustained, and that farmers are supported to integrate these into the way they farm?**

[1] **What pioneering practices do we need to adopt to move beyond routine antibiotic use?**

It was suggested that we look to other systems which have achieved a drastic reduction in livestock use (such as the Danish yellow-card system). Whilst there was strong advocacy for the use of benchmarking and industry standardisation as a means to achieve targets, this was opposed by some on the basis that different systems experience different rates and types of infection, and such an approach may therefore be of limited use. An issue was raised relating to comparison with the Danish model – in that farming systems in Denmark are highly intensified.

It was noted that there is also difficulty in obtaining representative data on antibiotic use across livestock sectors (although there are new sector-specific initiatives which are seeing a positive level of engagement). The absence of data was recognised by some as being a hindrance to the assessment and approaches to tackling antimicrobial resistance.

There was a discussion on the approach taken in the Netherlands, where industry was required by policy-makers to come up with solutions to reduce and improve veterinary antibiotic use, as an alternative to the imposition of regulatory measures. This industry-led, voluntary approach was subsequently written into more robust regulation.

Two practical solutions were proposed; the banning of blanket dry-cow therapy and later weaning of piglets. On the latter, this was suggested on the basis that by leaving piglets with sows for just one or two additional weeks can greatly reduce the need for antibiotics, at relatively little cost to producers.

This suggestion was opposed by some on the grounds that there is little evidence to support the theory that weaning piglets later reduces antibiotic use, and it was claimed that the notion that most antibiotics used in pig farming were during the weaning stage is ‘out of date’. This was refuted by another participant, who suggested that the weaning period - usually at three or four weeks in ‘conventional’ systems, is in fact when antibiotic treatment is at its highest and is often prophylactic.
One participant defended prophylactic use on the basis of animal welfare, specifically in circumstances where previous infections had been identified. This view was opposed, with some arguing that there are no circumstances in which groups of animals should be administered antibiotics prophylactically when there is no disease diagnosed in any of the animals.

Furthermore, it was argued that there is no reason why banning prophylaxis should result in poor animal welfare if treatment is provided after infection is identified.

There were also claims that prophylactic use was in danger of being overstated – that campaigners were ‘behind the curve’ - and that prophylactic use has been declining in recent years (especially in poultry). It was countered that this accusation (that campaign groups were ‘out-of-date’) illustrated the lack of, and need for, transparency and good data from the livestock farming industry.

It was stated that there have long been calls by some for restrictions or bans to farm use of certain critically important antimicrobials in certain settings - for example, the use of fluoroquinolones in poultry. Despite continued calls for such reductions/restrictions, for many years use continued to go up (although there have been recent reductions), and the industry therefore runs the risk that these antibiotics will be banned altogether due to clear evidence resistance is transferring to human infections.

This suggestion met strong opposition on the basis that, in some circumstances, no alternatives are licenced for use in turkeys. However, it was pointed out that removing fluoroquinolone use for use in turkeys would automatically mean that the use of alternative, less critically important antibiotics, would become legal in those situations.

It was flagged that other, less critically important antibiotics were no longer available in certain species having being removed once patents expired. This market failure had, reduced the pool of available drugs.

It was suggested that the definition of antibiotics classed as ‘critically important’ needs clarification.

The view was expressed that the overuse of antibiotics was not an issue with systems, but a result of poor stockmanship and animal welfare. It was countered that the inability to raise animals without routine antibiotic use suggested the need for system change.

Industry representatives pointed to significant recent reductions in antibiotic use in poultry and suggested that the pig industry, may also be on the cusp of reducing its use.

It was noted that we need to be clear about our definitions of what constitutes ‘responsible use’ - the NFU response to the O’Neill Report (that the UK industry wide target of reducing levels to 50 mg per kg by 2018 was unachievable) was cited as an example of inconsistencies in the policy positions of senior farming industry representatives. This response was dismissed by a number of roundtable participants as out-of-step with wider industry opinion.
[2] How do we promote widespread uptake of better practices within the farming and veterinary industries?

There was a very clear consensus that a joined-up approach would be needed from the farming industry, retailers, the pharmaceutical industry and consumer groups. It was noted by one participant that, contrary to what many think, pharmaceutical companies have indicated a readiness to engage positively.

It was agreed that retailers need to be more pro-active in using their considerable influence over farmers (in respect of the lucrative contracts offered to individual suppliers) and to show some leadership in enacting a change of approach.

It was noted that the vet-retailer relationship is also key – with vets kept abreast of any antibiotic-use policies adopted by retailers.

Consumers, it was suggested, are under-utilised in their ability to bring about change. Consumers were described as the ‘sleeping giant’ in this debate.

An issue raised in respect to consumers was price expectation – the UK has seen a race to the bottom in terms of food prices, which can reasonably be expected to get worse post-Brexit. In this sense, the disconnect between consumers and the rest of the food system, and the demand for the cheapest food possible, is a very real concern.

It was stated that greater effort should be made to inform and educate the public on this issue. One participant – point out that there is often confusion on this issue amongst the public, who tend to assume that the problem is one of residues rather than resistance.

The ‘Antibiotic Free’ label was raised, with near unanimous agreement that this is an ineffective and misleading approach, which can have a negative impact on animal welfare. It was highlighted that Antibiotic Free labelling in the US has nevertheless been instrumental in driving public awareness on this issue.

It was stated that farmers need to be positively engaged. A participant cautioned about reducing all of this issue down to a question of economics, and the financial pressure on farm businesses.

Many participants agreed that there is undoubtedly a cultural and behavioural element to the reliance of some farmers on antibiotics, and an accessible system of education and information sharing is an essential component to bringing about a change across all sectors. It was also considered that farmers may not positively engage with further regulation, and a voluntary industry-led approach would be preferred.

A participant noted that it is important to recognise the importance of the ‘right’ approach – farmers are extremely busy and generally concerned with on-farm activity rather than with attending events or reading information leaflets.

It was proposed that there is a need to investigate and understand the way export markets have approached this problem differently, to examine the effect of this difference in approach and discern if there are lessons we can learn – as well as exploring opportunities for collaboration internationally.
[3] How do we ensure new practices are sustained, and that farmers are supported to integrate these into the way we farm?

It was stated that since the outcome of the EU Referendum on 24 June, the political landscape has changed hugely, and it is still too early to anticipate what impact this will have on the prioritisation of this issue by Defra and other government bodies (including the VMD).

The proposal that we need to ensure that sustained pressure is maintained and that momentum is built within the industry was met with broad agreement. Concerns were expressed by one participant about the close commercial relationship between the Veterinary Medicines Directorate and the pharmaceutical industry.

It was agreed that the recently published O’Neill report provides a welcome mandate from government, which has been historically lacking. Some voiced the concern that there is a lack of leadership and accountability when it comes to tackling farm antibiotic use, and that this needs to be pushed across sectors to ensure that not only does it remain on the political agenda, but that it is taken seriously.

The concern was raised that campaigning by NGOs against planning applications was stifling the development and replacement of new housing units – seen by the farming industry as an important practical step in reducing the transmission of infections. It was said that time and resources are being diverted dealing with such opposition, and corresponding media enquiries by journalists. This view was challenged by a participant on the basis that new large-scale systems represent a ‘locking-in’ of intensive systems which are generally not conducive to achieving reductions in antibiotic use.

It was also suggested by one participant that there needs to be more clarity on the roles played by farmers and veterinarians – who is in charge of antibiotic stewardship? An analogy was drawn between a GP and patient, and the potential for an ‘inverse’ relationship between these two parties, where the patient dictates prescribing policy.

The response to this was that prescribing decisions are generally a shared responsibility between farmers and their vet, and that such flexibility is inherent in the vet-farmer relationship.

It was suggested that vets may be less likely to prescribe antibiotics if there were clearer guidelines about their usage, which could be referred to across the sector. Once again, education, best practice and information exchange was put forward as crucial to progress – seen as particularly relevant in the absence of a government department representing the veterinary sector, which must set its own guidelines. It was stated that more funding needs to be provided for education (of farmers, by vets).

The new ‘task force’ currently being set up by RUMA on the back of the O’Neill report was referred to as a useful platform for continuing discussion. This will look at how meaningful targets can be developed to reduce and improve UK farm antibiotic. It was suggested that organic livestock farmers are represented on this group – in order to share some insights from a sector which generally requires far fewer antibiotics than its non-organic counterparts.

Finally, it was noted that many examples exist of farmers using far fewer antibiotics. It was suggested that more needs to be done to research, identify and highlight best practice in order to identify mechanisms which reduce the need for antibiotics, and that this must be a key focus for advocacy groups going forward.
CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This event was an extremely positive and unprecedented convening of stakeholders with a long history of disagreements about the extent to which farm antibiotics use is a public-health issue, and the solutions required to tackle it.

The discussion highlighted that there has been a (fairy recent) sea change in thinking on this issue, and that there is a welcome sense of working toward the shared goals of more responsible antibiotic use and better farm management.

It appears that, while there is wide consensus that the UK farming industry needs to move away from practices such as the routine preventative mass-medication of groups of animals, there is still some disagreement on this issue, and a lack of clear commitment from some stakeholders on specific issues raised by the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics.

On the back of this event, the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics will draft three new briefings for the pig, poultry and dairy sectors. These briefings will draw on the roundtable discussion to outline current sector-specific measures being taken to reduce antibiotic use, consider whether these are ambitious enough in their scope, and make recommendations for further progress.

The Alliance to Save our Antibiotics would like to thank the Food Research Collaboration at City University for kindly hosting this event and providing lunch

Contact us:

Emma Rose
Co-ordinator, Alliance to Save our Antibiotics
erose@saveourantibiotics.eu

Coilin Nunan
Scientific Advisor, Alliance to Save our Antibiotics
collin.nunan@phonecoop.coop

The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics is an alliance of health, medical, environmental and animal welfare groups working to stop the over-use of antibiotics in farming. It was founded by Compassion in World Farming, the Soil Association, and Sustain in 2009, and is supported by the Jeremy Coller Foundation.