

Protecting public health through effective policy

****check against delivery****

I am very pleased to be joining you here today.

This is such an important issue and one that is close to my heart.

What really brought it home to me was my niece Maisie being diagnosed with cystic fibrosis.

Before that, well before my appointment as Labour's Shadow Defra Secretary I wrote to the Defra Minister, George Eustice, on behalf of constituents who'd contacted me as part of an Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics campaign.

The response I received genuinely shocked me, as it did my constituents.

I've raised this with Defra Ministers and Secretaries of State many times since then, and continued to be shocked by the complacency of their response.

They are, I believe, overseeing the demise of our antibiotics through their failure to act on this emerging public health crisis.

This is a problem - as Tim Lang and others have said – that is “happening on our watch”. And our failure to act will be a price paid by future generations.

The problem of Anti-Microbial resistance [AMR] was first uncovered over half a century ago.

In fact, even during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1945, Sir Alexander Fleming warned about the development of resistance and the moral imperative in using his discovery properly.

The Chief Medical Officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, has warned that a post-antibiotic era could start any time in the next 10 or 20 years, when previously treatable infections could once again become life-threatening.

We know that just as there is a clear correlation between rising levels of human use of antibiotics and growing resistance, the same is true in agriculture.

Higher use of antibiotics in farming is undermining their effectiveness in human medicine.

The **World Health Organisation** has said that the overuse of antibiotics in livestock production is

- the most important source of resistant strains of salmonella and campylobacter bacteria.

And – to a lesser extent:

- a new strain of MRSA in farm animals, which is transferring to humans;
- and *antibiotic-resistant E. coli, including E. coli resistant to critically important or even to last-resort antibiotics.*

Last summer, **MRSA** of a livestock origin was found – for the first time - in **British retail pork**.

The study indicated that MRSA – which has, of course, developed resistance to many types of antibiotics - was likely to be well-established within the UK pig herd, from where it can be passed on to people through supermarket meat, as well as through direct contact and in the environment.

If left unchecked, the spread of MRSA could cause very real problems.

A few years ago in the Netherlands, the type of MRSA found in UK retail pork was found to cause 42% of human cases, but this figure is now falling because the Dutch have cut farm antibiotic use.

We also discovered last summer that nearly three-quarters of fresh **chickens** were contaminated with **campylobacter**. A critically important class of antibiotics used to treat these infections is under threat due to its overuse in farming

And just before Christmas, we learned that resistance to **colistin** – a last-resort antibiotic for humans – had transferred from farm animals to humans.

EU:

MEPS voted a few weeks ago, by 95% in favour of amendments to proposed EU veterinary medicines legislation to ban routine preventative use, including a ban on group treatments where there is no diagnosis of disease in any of the animals.

It is now up to the Council of Ministers and the Commission to support this EU Parliament vote, and for the UK Government to take a lead in these discussions.

We need strong international action to prevent antibiotics being given to animals who do not need them, alongside parallel efforts to reduce their use in human medicine.

Without concerted action we could also lose effective agents for use in farming, which could severely affect our agricultural industry and our food security.

A number of other European countries have already set ambitious targets, bans, and strategies to ensure responsible antibiotic use in farming.

It's time for the UK to follow suit.

When I first contacted **George Eustice**, a couple of years ago, he barely acknowledged there was a problem. He just said that antibiotics are prescribed by vets and it is done responsibly.

But in reply to a more recent Question, he said: "The Government's policy is that the administration of antibiotics in the absence of disease is not a responsible way to use antibiotics".

But we know this isn't happening in practice.

Mass medication is still far too frequent in the pig and poultry industries.

Routine mass medication of groups of animals, either on a purely preventative basis, or when just a few animals within the group are sick is still widespread, particularly in the pig industry, although some significant reductions have recently been made by the poultry industry.

A number of veterinary medicines continue to be licensed for purely preventative disease prevention in the UK, even when no disease has been diagnosed in any of the animals on the farm.

Governments and their regulators must now act now to put the principles of 'responsible use' into practice.

There has been no lack of evidence for supporting action.

The Government's own advisers - in summarising all the academic papers on the science of antibiotic use in farming and resistance in human health – concluded that we can no longer delay action.

The **Review on Antimicrobial Resistance** – the 2014 Commission convened by the Prime Minister and chaired by former Goldman Sachs economist, Lord Jim O'Neill – found compelling evidence for action without delay: recommending global targets and restrictions on use of those antibiotics critically important for human health.

So why has effective policy been so slow?

With considerable cuts to its funding over the last few years, Defra seems to be in process of managed decline, with dwindling resources to carry out its core functions.

We are faced with a Department, recently described by an exasperated organisation working in the waste sector, as “utterly depleted in terms of funding, resources and vision”.

We have an ideological commitment to a de-regulation agenda, which undermines Defra’s role in protecting vital public goods, from clean air to safe food. Delaying or taking a negative stance on protection for the environment, for consumers, for animal welfare.

Most recently, Defra secretly tabled an order to scrap **statutory codes on farm animal welfare** and move to “industry-led” guidance. The public outcry at the government’s attempts to wash their hands of their responsibilities led to a welcome last-minute u-turn.

The recent publication by the **British Poultry Council** of data across the industry on antibiotic usage – and of its strategies for ending routine use, as part of a voluntary scheme - is very welcome.

The collection and transparent publication of this data on use – rather than just sales - is a vital first step in reduction efforts.

It’s also very encouraging to see that usage has significantly reduced, and participants in the scheme have agreed to no longer use colistin.

But my concern with voluntary schemes is that they rarely drive action at the pace we need.

And too often there is a conflict of interest between short-term financial interests and the public good.

Government action, by contrast – including the setting of targets – helps to set a level playing field, to support those farmers that are making great strides and to ensure no one would have a competitive advantage from not taking action.

There is also the classic problem of this issue falling into different government departmental silos, when it needs cross-cutting action.

Whilst GPs are increasingly urged to take action, antibiotic usage in farming tends to escape scrutiny.

But farm animals account for almost two thirds of antibiotics used in Europe, and around 40% in the UK.

Lack of ambitious enough action in reducing their overuse in farming risks undermining any progress that's made in human medicine.

It seems illogical to set measurable reduction targets for human health – **in the Government's 5 Year AMR Strategy** - but not in veterinary use.

GPs are being advised to apply vigorous tests on patients to see if drugs will be effective before prescribing them; and the health regulator, NICE, has even suggested that soft touch doctors should be sanctioned for over-prescribing.

But routinely dosing healthy animals with close analogues of these drugs is still being permitted.

The therapeutic use of antibiotics in animals is essential for treating infection – as it is for humans - but much of the use in animals is not therapeutic.

In Europe it remains legal to routinely treat groups of healthy animals via their feed and drinking water, even when no disease has been diagnosed in any animals being treated.

Some will argue that **preventative antibiotic use in more intensive farming** provides insurance against disease outbreaks, helping consumers to access cheap meat and to maximise farm efficiency & productivity.

But it is clear that this is now coming at an unaffordable cost.

These costs will fall on the shoulders of our NHS.

Jim O'Neill has estimated the global economic impact of AMR by 2050 as a colossal \$100 trillion in sacrificed gross national product.

This inability to internalise the external costs is endemic in Defra, despite the work of the Natural Capital Committee.

Liz Truss's forthcoming 25-year food and farming plan is basically a marketing plan for British farming, a push for ever greater production and more exports.

And yes, we all want British farming to thrive.

But we cannot look at farming and food production in such a narrow context, without reference to its importance to our natural environment, and to our health.

I appreciate that policy action would present a challenge to livestock farmers and vets, in finding other ways of keeping animals healthy without routine treatments.

This could require a shift to more extensive systems, which generally require fewer drugs, a move towards genetic selection for natural robustness, and improvements to housing and husbandry.

I read an interesting farming chat on-line recently, in response to an article I'd written. Encouragingly, there was overwhelming consensus that action was needed, with general support for a ban on prophylactic use.

At a time when so many farmers are struggling, many highlighted the need to make it economical to shift to better practices, with some mentioning better labelling.

I agree, the retail market has a crucial part to play in providing the right market conditions.

Labelling is critical as part of this. Indeed, I've recently written to Liz Truss about better labelling for meat and dairy products, so consumers can make informed choices, and higher welfare products can be recognised, although I was less than impressed with the response.

Use of antibiotics in UK pigs and poultry in 2014 was at least three and a half times higher per unit of livestock than in these species in the Netherlands.

Both Denmark and the Netherlands have dramatically cut antibiotic use, yet both countries remain economically competitive and are among Europe's leading meat exporters.

I have no doubt that our farming industry can rise to this challenge.

What we need from Government right now is strong leadership and ambition, and close working with our European allies, to address these difficult issues.

I have therefore written a joint letter with Heidi Alexander, Labour's Shadow Health Secretary, to the Environment Secretary and the Health Secretary urging them to respond positively to the European Parliament's recent proposals to end the routine, preventative use of antibiotics in farming,

There have been too many reports recently of the Government playing a negative role behind the scenes in EU negotiations, when there is huge potential for it to be playing a much more positive role.

As well as working to secure an effective EU strategy, there is more the Government could be doing right now.

Today, I would like to announce, as Labour's Shadow Secretary of State, that Labour will endorse:

Targets for reducing antibiotics in farming – to complement the targets already set for human medicine, and similar to those introduced in other European countries including The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and France – including a timetable for phasing out routine prophylactic use of antibiotics in groups of animals.

And specific targets to cut the use of antibiotics critically important in human medicine, including banning use of certain classes in certain species.

With so much at stake, time is running out.

We cannot risk a post-antibiotic future. I don't think future generations would forgive us.

ENDS