

Client: Soil Association
Source: Farm Business
Date: 03/06/2016

Keyword: Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics
Page: 12
Reach: 15046
Size: 874
Value: 4072.84

Agriculture looks set to be affected first by the O'Neill Review on Antibiotic Resistance

The over-use of antibiotics in human health care made the headlines when the O'Neill Review on Antimicrobial Resistance was released, but farm animal health will be the first to feel the direct results, says **Michael Wale**

Treasury minister Jim O'Neill has chaired the two-year review of drug-resistant infections, commonly known as 'superbugs', at a time when the overuse of antibiotics in farming is already claimed to be threatening the effectiveness of human medicine. In America, 70% of all antibiotics are used on livestock, while two years ago, China was consuming 162,000 tonnes of antibiotics, more than half of the global total, 52% of which were used on livestock.

Europe already has strict rules about the use of antibiotics on animals, including a ban on growth hormones, but the O'Neill Review wants to see stricter rules worldwide, especially in the wealthier nations, such as the UK.

The Review recommends a three-point plan. First, 10-year targets should be set, introduced in 2018, to reduce unnecessary use of antibiotics in agriculture, with milestones to support progress consistent with countries' economic development.

Second, there should be restrictions or bans on certain types of highly critical antibiotics. The Review states: "Too many antibiotics are being used in agriculture, sometimes without even professional oversight. There needs to be prime focus of efforts to reduce con-

sumption in animals and action should be taken on this now."

Third, there is a call to improve transparency from food producers on the antibiotics used to raise the meat we eat, to enable consumers to make more informed purchase decisions.

The Review notes: "There are clearly circumstances where antibi-

Save Our Antibiotics staged a day-long conference, which I attended in London, bringing together multi-

otics are required in agriculture and aquaculture. Their proper use can maintain animal health and welfare, as well as food security. However, much of their global use is not for treating sick animals, but instead either to prevent infections (sometimes to compensate for poor farming practices) or simply to promote growth. The quantity of antibiotics used in livestock is vast,

and these include medicines that are important for humans."

Later on the Review notes that there are often many opportunities in intensive farming for drug-resistant bacteria to be transferred between, for example, thousands of chickens being reared in the same indoor enclosure.

A month before the release of the O'Neill Review, the Alliance To

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disciplinary stakeholders including policymakers, farmers, scientists and veterinarians, exploring practical steps to reduce farm antibiotic use and drawing on successful interventions taking place across the EU.

One of the vets present was dairy vet Tom Clarke from Synergy Farm Health, a farm vet practice servicing 200-plus dairy farms across Somerset, Dorset and Devon, who told me that the practice has always monitored the use of antibiotics prescribed to farms, but two years ago started benchmarking the farms under its care, encouraged by the political wind of change, pressure from supermarkets and retailers.

"Our farmers produce a product drunk every day by a large section of the population. We've a huge responsibility and must have a very active role in encouraging responsible use of antibiotics," said Mr Clarke.

He estimated that on some farms

Cephalosporins) as we understand the importance of these families in human medicine."

Helen Browning, CEO of the Soil

Association, is also a tenanted organic farmer and branded pork supplier. Addressing the conference, she explained: "Some people think we don't use antibiotics at all, but animal health comes first. The key role for me is the role of the vet – they are very reluctant to move away from the use of drugs on the farm. A lot of vets' practices rely on pharmaceutical sales, so often as farmers we use these things because we've been told to."

Ms Browning explained the creation of the Innovative Farmers scheme, whereby conventional as well as organic farmers come together on a farm to discuss and hopefully solve a problem common to them all. The use of antibiotics was being addressed and it had been found that peppermint oil had helped to clear up mastitis.

Answering questions from the audience, she told one questioner: "Often vets come onto my farm tearing their hair out and asking 'how do I get these farmers to change?' The role of the market is important – the retailers. We're going to need a stick and carrot, much as I don't agree with forcing anyone to do something."

Dr Jenny Lindstrom, a vet from Sweden, said her country's farmers used the least antibiotics in the EU. She said if you had a production system that had a high level of disease you would need more antibiotics. She asked her audience: "What has Sweden done?" answering: "There are veterinary guidelines on production. Mass medication is only a temporary solution, lasting at most three to six months. We have very strict views in Swedish veterinary about mass

medication. Antibiotics are only given on a vet's prescription.

"There's an economic incentive for farmers to improve biosecurity and eradicate disease. Healthy animals are wealthy animals."

She added that Sweden believed in voluntary guidance, not regulation, and the combination of farmers and vets working together had worked for the past 30 years.

The conference organiser, the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics, welcomed the O'Neill Review and called on DEFRA to set a target for reducing farm antibiotic use by 50% by 2020, 80% by 2050, and 95% five years later.

"Some people think we don't use antibiotics at all, but animal health comes first"

use of antibiotics has been reduced in certain areas by up to 50%, explaining: "We've talked in groups and individually to our farmers and aim to have an antibiotic stewardship system on each farm.

"The primary aim is to rationalise and reduce overall antibiotic use, but we have actively sought to minimise the use of the critical classes of antibiotics (Flouroquinolones and



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