

NEWS RELEASE



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Documentary exposes link between intensive pig industry and new type of MRSA

A documentary, commissioned by the Soil Association, in conjunction with Compassion in World Farming, is being released today to expose the rise of a new strain of MRSA in pigs, and its link to the overuse of antibiotics on intensive farms. [1]

'Sick as a pig' was filmed in the Netherlands, one of the countries most seriously affected by this farm-animal MRSA. It finds that 40% of Dutch pigs and up to 50% of Dutch pig farmers are now carrying the new strain, which is also spreading to the wider population. Although this type of MRSA was first detected in humans in the Netherlands as recently as 2003, it now causes almost one in three cases of MRSA treated in Dutch hospitals. [2]

It is not yet known whether any British pigs are affected by the new strain of MRSA (called ST398) since the results of testing, which was required by the EU and carried out in 2008, have not been made public. [3]

Several countries have already published the results of their own tests revealing significant levels of MRSA in national pig herds. [4] The European Food Safety Authority has said that, 'It seems likely that MRSA ST398 is widespread in the food animal population, most likely in all Member States with intensive animal production'. [5]

Dutch scientists and Government officials blame the widespread use of antibiotics in intensive pig farming for the rise and rapid spread of farm-animal MRSA. [6] The Soil Association has calculated that about 64% of all farm antibiotic use in the UK is in pig production [7].

Approximately 60% of the pig meat eaten in the UK comes from the Netherlands and other countries which have MRSA in their pig herds. A Dutch Government study has found that about 10% of Dutch pork is contaminated with MRSA, yet the UK has introduced no controls on imports, and the Food Standards Agency has refused to undertake any testing of meat for MRSA. [8] [9]

Richard Young, Soil Association policy adviser said,

"The British Government has buried its head in the sand and is wasting a critical opportunity to prevent farm-animal MRSA getting a hold in the UK. Decisive action could reduce risks to human health, costs to the NHS and avoid another potentially devastating food-safety crisis.

This new type of MRSA is spreading like wildfire across Europe, and we know it is transferring from farm animals to humans – with serious health impacts.

The Government has to wake up and start looking after the interests of ordinary people and not just the intensive livestock industry and international drug companies.

It is simply not acceptable to allow methods of food production which take away one of the biggest advances in medical science - our ability to treat and cure serious infections in the human population with antibiotics. We are sitting on a time-bomb here, and while most people have been kept in the dark about the issue, the Government's inaction will cost them dear for many years to come."

John Callaghan, director of programmes at Compassion in World Farming said,

"MRSA is yet another potential example of how harmful factory farming is for animals and people. Pigs reared intensively often live in stressful conditions, subject to painful mutilations, unable to express their natural behaviour and prone to diseases. Factory farms where animals are unnaturally crowded and stressed, even with careful management, are always likely to need drugs to keep infections at bay.

Cheap pork has nasty implications for the welfare of animals and for human health. We should eat less, but better meat- coming from animals that have lived a happy and healthy life."

[Ends]

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Notes to editors:

[1] 'Sick as a pig' can be viewed online at <http://www.theecologist.org/etv/>

and http://www.green.tv/ecologist_sick_as_a_pig1 (from 13.30, 20 March)

It is a new documentary made by the Ecologist Film Unit based on an investigation by Ecostorm for the Soil Association / Compassion in World Farming and the Soil Association report, '[MRSA in farm animals and meat: a new threat to human health](#)' (2007)

[2] Interviewed in the film, Dr Mireille Wulf a microbiologist from the Maxima Medical Centrum in Eindhoven says, that "If you carry an MRSA you are at higher risk of getting and MRSA infection". She adds that in her region MRSA infections went from "an average of 45 or 50 patients a year... to, last year 224, and 60% of those are animal-related MRSA".

Patients with farm-animal MRSA in the Netherlands, and in other EU countries including the UK, have developed blood poisoning, skin infections, heart infections, bone infections and pneumonia. Over 60% of MRSA cases in some pig-farming regions in the Netherlands are now caused by the farm-animal strain.

[3] The UK has decided not to publish any British results from the EU survey of pigs for MRSA before November 2009, although some other member states have already published preliminary results from their countries. The EU survey involves testing samples of dust taken from a proportion of farms with breeding pigs. In national surveys in several other countries pigs have also been tested for MRSA directly.

The Soil Association has been told by the UK's Veterinary Laboratories Agency that the British results from the EU-wide survey will only be made available when the European Food Standards

Agency publishes all the European results together. The Association has also been told by the European Commission that this will be in November this year.

Sweden and Austria have already published preliminary results from their EU-required surveys. In particular, Austrian Government scientists recently published a scientific paper reporting that preliminary results showed that 5-10% of dust samples taken from Austrian pig farms were MRSA-positive. See:

Springer B, Orendi U, Much P, Höger G, Ruppitsch W, Krziwanek K, Metz-Gercek S, Mittermayer H., 2009., Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*: a new zoonotic agent?, *Wiener klinische Wochenschrift*, **121**: 86-90

[4] Surveys in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Canada and the US have all found that MRSA is common in pigs.

[5] EFSA, 2008. [Foodborne antimicrobial resistance as a biological hazard, Scientific Opinion of the Panel on Biological Hazards](#), Adopted on 9 July 2008

[6] Dik Mevius, Professor of Microbial Resistance at the Animal Sciences Group in Lelystad says, "Tetracycline, more or less all over the world, is one of the most used antibiotics in animal production... It's quite likely that this usage of tetracyclines is one of the reasons that these MRSA are so commonly present".

[7] This percentage has been calculated from statistics published by the UK's Veterinary Medicines Directorate. See ['MRSA in farm animals and meat: a new threat to human health'](#) (2007)

Organic standards, in contrast, prohibit the routine use of antibiotics

[8] Scientists believe there is only a low risk of contaminated meat causing cases of MRSA in healthy individuals, but British Government scientists have recognised that anyone whose immune system was not fully functional would be at increased risk of infection from handling contaminated meat. See item 6.3 of the minutes of the DARC Group held on 12 February 2008 <http://www.vmd.gov.uk/General/DARC/SumMinsFeb08.pdf>

Those at a higher risk are likely to include many elderly people, young children and anyone suffering from illnesses like AIDS, TB and cancer.

[9] Although the UK imports no live pigs from the Netherlands, Denmark or Germany, where farm-animal MRSA has been confirmed, we do import live chicks and turkey poults from several countries which have MRSA in their poultry, including the Netherlands and Belgium. Sixty percent of the pork meat we consume is imported. 87% of imported bacon comes from the Netherlands or Denmark. 63% of imported pork and 57% of imported processed pig meat comes from Denmark, the Netherlands or Germany. The Soil Association is calling on the Government to:

- Publish interim results of its testing for MRSA in pigs and introduce a comprehensive testing programme for MRSA in other farm-animal species;
- Urgently instigate a testing programme to establish the MRSA status of UK livestock and meat on sale;
- Fully implement its claimed commitment to reducing use of veterinary antibiotics – including banning advertising of all antibiotics to farmers;
- Immediately prohibit the prophylactic and off-label use of all antibiotics on farms that are defined as 'critically important' in human medicine by the World Health Organisation;

Screen all farm workers and vets coming into the UK from countries where farm-animal MRSA has been found.