

NEWS RELEASE



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Campaigners urge Gordon Brown to take action over 'irresponsible use of antibiotics in the agricultural sector'

Soil Association director Patrick Holden and Compassion in World Farming director Philip Lymbery have today written to the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, urging him to recognise the importance of statements made in the Chief Medical Officer's report [1], published last week, on the problem of antimicrobial resistance being transferred from farm animals to humans [2].

Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson refers to:

'Irresponsible antibiotic use in the agricultural sector' and calls for 'tighter regulation of use in animals'.

He also states that:

'Resistant bacteria developing in animals could pose a threat to people. Antibiotics must be used in moderation in agricultural settings and only when necessary for animal welfare.'

'Every antibiotic expected by a patient, every unnecessary prescription written by a doctor, every uncompleted course of antibiotics, and every inappropriate or unnecessary use in animals or agriculture is potentially signing a death warrant for a future patient.'

Soil Association director Patrick Holden said:

"The Soil Association and Compassion in World Farming strongly welcome Sir Liam's statements. We have chosen to raise this issue with Gordon Brown because we feel that only he is in a position to get Defra and the Department of Health working together in an effective and meaningful way to extend the Government's important campaign to discourage unnecessary antibiotic use by doctors and members of the public to include veterinary surgeons and farmers."

While the Government has directly intervened to reduce usage in human medicine, it has relied instead on a range of voluntary initiatives by the farming, retail and pharmaceutical industries purporting to encourage the 'responsible use' of antimicrobials. While we welcome these in principle, it is clear that in practice they do little more than endorse the irresponsible approach to the agricultural use of antibiotics and other veterinary antimicrobials that has persisted for many decades [3].

Compassion in World Farming director Philip Lymbery said:

"The responsible use of veterinary medicines is one thing; the routine use of antibiotics to keep animals in unhealthy intensive systems is another. It is imperative that Gordon Brown takes

action to address the routine use of antibiotics in intensive farms for the benefit of both human health and animal welfare".

The publication of the Chief Medical Officer's Annual Report coincided with the launch of a documentary 'Sick as a pig' [4] commissioned by the Soil Association, in conjunction with Compassion in World Farming, exposing the rise of a worrying new strain of MRSA in farm animals and its link to the continuing regular use of antibiotics in livestock feed.

[ENDS]

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Notes to Editors

[1] Chief Medical Officer's report:

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/AnnualReports/DH_096206

[2] Full letter available on request from the Soil Association press office

[3] Sir Liam Donaldson is particularly concerned about the veterinary use of two families of antibiotics, the quinolones and the cephalosporins, which are classified as 'critically important in human medicine' by the World Health Organisation because they are some of the most effective medicines left to treat a range of life-threatening infections.

The Soil Association has repeatedly, but without success, called for the Government to take urgent action against the rapidly increasing use of these same two classes of antibiotics. Because of the mounting evidence that they may be linked to the emergence on farms of superbugs like MRSA and the highly antibiotic-resistant ESBL E. coli, the Soil Association has also already unilaterally taken action to severely limit their use on the organic farms it certifies. However, Sir Liam believes that the situation is now so serious as to warrant a complete ban on using cephalosporins and quinolones in animals in order to protect their activity in humans.

[4] Soil Association press release: [Documentary exposes link between intensive pig industry and new type of MRSA](#) (20 March 2009)

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

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)