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Defra decision to allow antibiotic advertising increases risks to human health

“The use of antimicrobials* in animals is an important factor in the development of resistance in some organisms, particularly those organisms associated with food poisoning in man”

The UK's Veterinary Medicine Directorate, 2010

Defra appears to have caved into pressure from industry and farming press lobbyists and has rejected advice from its own expert body to come into line with the rest of Europe and keep the farming press free of antibiotic advertising by powerful multinationals.

Back in June 2010, the UK's Veterinary Medicine Directorate (VMD) proposed a ban on direct advertising of antibiotics to farmers by pharmaceutical companies. The VMD was concerned that such marketing may encourage the overuse of new antimicrobials of vital importance in human medicine, without considering the dangers of an increased risk of antimicrobial resistance. This advice had the support of the British Veterinary Association (BVA), and also several independent organisations concerned to promote sustainable food and farming (Compassion in World Farming, the Soil Association and Sustain: the Alliance for Better Food and Farming).

However, in an announcement on 30 December 2010, Defra ignored these independent experts and instead has pleased the drug companies and some in the farming industry by allowing direct advertising of these drugs to farmers.

Richard Young of the Soil Association said: “Reducing veterinary antimicrobial consumption as much as possible should be a key government policy objective. Allowing the advertising of antimicrobials to farmers can only make this more difficult to achieve since the primary purpose of a commercial advertisement is to promote sales. Defra's decision exposes the gross continuing disconnect between the government's approach to farm and human antibiotic use, as well as the very obvious way in which the decision has been influenced by industry lobbying instead of sound scientific judgement.”

Philip Lymbery, Chief Executive of Compassion in World Farming said: “Vital medicines such as antibiotics should be used to treat the sick, be they human or animal. Their overuse in farm animals has contributed to the serious problem of resistance to antibiotics in the human population and has also acted as a prop to factory farms where hundreds of pigs or thousands of chickens may be kept in unhealthy, overcrowded conditions and their vulnerability to infection masked by inappropriate use of important, life-saving drugs.”

Jeanette Longfield, Co-ordinator of Sustain, added: “As long ago as 1969, the highly influential report from the government-appointed Swann Committee recommended a ban on advertising to farmers of prescription-only antibiotics. Since then the problem of antibiotic resistance in human medicine has got worse and worse – we are already at “last resort” antibiotics for some illnesses. How much longer will it take for government to heed these warnings?”

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Notes to Editors

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* The term 'antimicrobials' includes antibiotics and synthetic drugs which are effective against some micro-organisms, especially bacteria.

1. Increasing resistance to antimicrobials is a serious global problem. In recent years, bodies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) have become concerned about the rise of antibiotic resistance in farm animals, and the extent of the transmission of resistant bacteria to humans.
2. Around half of the world's antibiotic production is used in food animals (Nathan, 2004). But commonly these are used in pig, poultry and dairy production not to cure disease (therapeutic use) but to suppress infections that are likely to arise in factory farm conditions (non-therapeutic or preventive use).
3. John FitzGerald, operations director of the VMD has said, 'It is considered that advertising these drugs to professional keepers of animals is leading to pressure on vets to prescribe new products that are being promoted as offering commercial benefits, when established older products may be a better therapeutic choice for treatment and for the control of antimicrobial resistance.'
4. In a survey of 10 European countries, the UK was found to be the third-largest user of antibiotics per kg of slaughtered pigs, poultry and cattle and of live dairy cows (Grave et al. 2010). Moreover, the use of fluoroquinolones and the modern cephalosporins, classed by WHO as 'critically important in human medicine' was shown in 2008 to be at its highest level in the UK for a decade,. This could be partly linked to the amount of advertising of these products: there has been a noticeably higher level of advertising for the modern cephalosporins in the farming press than for the fluoroquinolones, and there has been a correspondingly greater increase in their sales.
5. The VMD has said that "the use of antimicrobials in animals is an important factor in the development of resistance in some organisms, particularly those organisms associated with food poisoning in man" (VMD 2010). Antimicrobial-resistant *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* are two such important organisms. The European Food Safety Authority says that: 'food-associated MRSA may be an emerging problem' (EFSA 2008) and farm-animal antibiotic consumption is also being linked by many scientists to the current epidemic of extended-spectrum beta-lactamase (ESBL) enterobacteria infections in humans.
6. The UK is now the only country in the EU which has failed to implement an EU directive banning the advertising of antibiotics directly aimed at farmers.
7. Compassion in World Farming, the Soil Association and Sustain: the Alliance for Better Food and Farming and the Food Ethics Council submitted a joint response to the VMD Consultation on the Draft Veterinary Medicines Regulations 2010, which is available on request.

References

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