

Monday 14th November 2016

Senior medics call on government to immediately ban the routine use of antibiotics in UK farming

In an unprecedented move, fifteen senior medics have written to the UK government calling for urgent action to tackle the routine misuse of antibiotics in UK farming. [1]

Signatories to the letter, which was published today in The Telegraph to coincide with World Antibiotic Awareness Week, include the President of the Royal Society of Medicine - Babulal Sethia, the President of the British Medical Association - Professor Pali Hungin, and the Presidents of ten Royal Colleges and Societies.

Coordinated by the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics and Medact, the letter states: *“We urge the government to...immediately introduce a UK-wide ban on the routine preventative mass medication of animals, and to urgently curb farm use of the ‘critically important’ antibiotics.”*

Mass medication of intensively farmed livestock, particularly of pigs and poultry, accounts for nearly 90% of all farm antibiotic use in the UK. [2] It remains legal in the EU to routinely administer antibiotics to whole groups of livestock before any disease has been diagnosed within the group.

Professor Maureen Baker, Chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, said: *“GPs and our teams are doing an excellent job of reducing prescriptions for antibiotics, with the latest NHS figures showing a 2.6m decrease in UK general practice last year. But it’s not just the healthcare sector that has responsibility for curbing resistance to antibiotics; the agriculture sector must also play its part. If antibiotics continue to be given to livestock when they are not needed it will put patients at risk all over the world. We support the recommendations outlined in this letter and would urge the Secretaries of State to take them into serious consideration.”*

In March 2016, the European Parliament voted for an EU-wide ban to all routine antibiotic use in farming. [3] Forthcoming negotiations between the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament and the European Commission will consider this proposal. Letter signatories urge the UK government to take a strong stand in these discussions, and to ensure that, post Brexit, such measures are enshrined in UK law.

Professor Jane Dacre, President of the Royal College of Physicians said: *“In the light of the UK’s forthcoming exit from the EU, there is a clear need for unambiguous domestic policies*

which ensure that antibiotics are used judiciously in human and animal medicine. The use of important antibiotics to routinely mass medicate groups of livestock does not constitute judicious use, and should have no place in any antibiotic-reduction strategy for the UK.”

Emma Rose from the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics said: *“Welcome steps have been taken by some farming sectors to limit veterinary prescribing. But the continued use of antibiotics to routinely mass medicate of livestock risks undermining this progress. The government has repeatedly stated its opposition to such practices. Now, it must act.”*

MPs have also recently spoken out on this issue. Following the revelations in September of multi-drug resistant E.coli on supermarket meat, 57 MPs from across the political parties have signed an Early Day Motion calling on supermarkets to ban the routine preventative use of antibiotics in their supply chains. [4] However, only Waitrose has so far clarified that it prohibits such practices. [5]

Professor John Middleton, President of the Faculty of Public Health said: *“The evidence linking the overuse of antibiotics in farming and resistance in human bacterial infections is extremely compelling. It is clear that more needs to be done to limit veterinary prescribing. The government must now listen to, and act on, the concerns of the medical community - and place public health at the heart of considerations around the future UK farm antibiotic-use policy.”*

Dr David McCoy, Director of Medact said: *“The overuse of antibiotics in farming is part of a much larger problem with our food system and demand for cheap and abundant meat and animal products. Livestock can be reared without heavy reliance on antibiotics, if we improve animal husbandry and reverse the high consumption of meat in the UK.”*

ENDS

Notes to Editors

[1] A shortened version of the letter was published in [The Telegraph](#). The full letter, with references, is available here: <http://www.saveourantibiotics.org/news/news/senior-medics-call-on-government-to-immediately-ban-the-routine-use-of-antibiotics-in-uk-farming/>. It was signed by the following individuals, on behalf of their organisations:

1. Professor Maureen Baker, Chair, **Royal College of General Practitioners**
2. Babulal Sethia, President, **Royal Society of Medicine**
3. Professor Pali Hungin, President, **British Medical Association**

4. Professor Neena Modi, President, **Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health**
5. Professor Jane Dacre, President, **Royal College of Physicians**
6. Professor Derek Bell, President, **Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh**
7. Professor David Galloway, President, **Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow**
8. Professor John Middleton, President, **Faculty of Public Health**
9. Cecilia Anim, President, **Royal College of Nursing**
10. Dr Tajek Hassan, President, **Royal College of Emergency Medicine**
11. Mr Michael Lavelle-Jones, President, **Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh**
12. Dr Suzy Lishman, President, **Royal College of Pathologists**
13. Martin Astbury, President, **Royal Pharmaceutical Society**
14. Dr Richard Horton, Editor, **The Lancet**
15. Dr David McCoy, Director, **Medact**
16. Emma Rose, **Alliance to Save our Antibiotics**

[2] Mass medication accounts for about 88% of UK farm antibiotic use (premixes, ie. in feed, and water medication together account for about 89%), see p29 of https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/477788/Optimised_version_-_VARSS_Report_2014_Sales_Resistance_.pdf). The European Medicine Agency's report on farm antibiotic states that virtually all premixes and oral powders (for medication via water) is for mass medication: see p 26 of http://www.ema.europa.eu/docs/en_GB/document_library/Report/2015/10/WC500195687.pdf

[3] <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/20160303IPR16930/superbugs-meps-want-to-curb-use-of-antibiotics-in-farming>

[4] See Early Day Motion 488: <http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2016-17/488>

[5] http://www.waitrose.com/home/inspiration/about_waitrose/the_waitrose_way/waitrose_animal_welfarecommitments.html

The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics is an alliance of health, medical, environmental and animal welfare groups working to stop the overuse of antibiotics in animal farming. It was founded by Compassion in World Farming, the Soil Association and Sustain in 2009, and is supported by the Jeremy Coller Foundation.

Medact is a global health charity that grew out of the medical peace movement. It was formed in 1992 following the merger of two older organisations. Through education,

research, analysis and advocacy Medact aims to inspire and enable health professionals to act on the social, political, ecological and economic determinants of health and health inequality. Medact works across four broad and interconnected programme areas Peace and Security; Economic Justice; Climate and Ecology and Health and Human Rights. Medact's work around antibiotics and farming falls under their Climate and Ecology programme and is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

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