Labour announces policy position on farm antibiotics, as new figures show that resistance to critical drug is spreading from poultry to people

A new report published by the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics shows that the effectiveness of fluoroquinolone antibiotics, which are classified as critically important in human medicine, is being undermined by their continued use in poultry.

Unveiled at a conference jointly hosted by the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics and Medact on Thursday 14 April, the report shows that countries which have banned these antibiotics in poultry have much lower levels of fluoroquinolone resistance in human Campylobacter infections than countries that continue to use them.

Fluoroquinolones are important for treating serious human Campylobacter infections, but under EU legislation they can be added to the drinking water of flocks of poultry, even when no disease is present.

The United States banned these antibiotics for use in poultry in 2005, due to concerns from the Food and Drug Administration that it caused resistance in human Campylobacter infections. The US now has one of the lowest rates of fluoroquinolone resistance in these infections in the world despite being a very high user of the antibiotics in human medicine.

In contrast, due to its continuing use of these antibiotics in poultry, the UK has a much higher level of resistance in human Campylobacter infections even though it is an exceptionally low user of them in human medicine.

The Alliance to Save our Antibiotics called yesterday for an EU-wide ban to all use of the fluoroquinolone antibiotics in poultry.

Professor Barry Cookson from University College London, who spoke at the conference, said: *"We need clear guidance as to what is 'acceptable' when it comes to farm use. It is concerning that use of our most important drugs to treat animals is on the rise in many EU countries, and - as these new figures show - is clearly contributing to the human resistance problem."*

British doctors have cut their use of these important antibiotics in recent years. But with latest Public Health England statistics showing that fluoroquinolone resistance in Campylobacter infections is now at an all-time high, there is concern that progress in human medicine is being undermined by continued use of the antibiotics in poultry.

Kerry McCarthy MP, speaking at the conference, set out for the first time the Labour party's position on farm antibiotics, saying: *"Today, I would like to announce, as Labour's Shadow Secretary of State, that Labour will endorse including a timetable for phasing out routine prophylactic use of antibiotics in groups of animals. And specific targets to cut the use of antibiotics critically important in human medicine – such as the fluoroquinolones – in farming."*

Professor Tim Walsh, Cardiff University, who was also a speaker at the conference said: *"We urgently need to curb farm use of drugs classed as 'Critically Important' for humans. Farmers and veterinarians must draw on examples of where use of these drugs in farming have been already banned, or substantially reduced. With doctors now struggling to find an effective cure for serious human infections, it is imperative that the responsibility for action is shared by all stakeholders."*

The average resistance rate in the EU is even higher than in the UK, as fluoroquinolones are used more widely in most European farming than in British farming. The European Food Safety Authority and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control recently said that 'this is a compelling example of how antimicrobial resistance in food

and animals may impact the availability of effective antimicrobial agents for treating severe human Campylobacter infections'.

Cóilín Nunan, Scientific Adviser to the Alliance, said: "*The British pharmaceutical and farming industries, and some veterinarians, claim that bans in countries like the US and Denmark have not helped control resistance in humans. Our analysis shows that this is incorrect, and that these bans have been a major public-health success story. Unfortunately, our analysis also shows that countries that don't use fluoroquinolones in poultry are importing resistance when they import poultry meat from countries that still use the drugs. This is why we urgently need a British and EU ban on fluoroquinolone use in poultry.*"

Notes to Editors

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. Its vision is a world in which human and animal health and wellbeing are protected by food and farming systems that do not rely routinely on antibiotics and related drugs.

The conference, titled 'Antibiotics in farming: prescriptions for change' brought together delegates spanning public health, medical, farming, civil society, and environmental organisations. Speakers included Professor Rosalind Smyth, CEO of the Institute of Child Health; Dr Osman Dar from Chatham House and Nigel Gibbens, UK Chief Veterinary Officer.

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