

Medics and scientists call for a ban on routine mass-medication of healthy farm animals as antibiotic resistance increases across Europe

Fifty medical experts and eminent scientists from across Europe and the US have signed a letter to MEPs on the EU Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) committee, encouraging them to support a ban on antibiotics being used for routine preventative treatments of groups of healthy farm animals. [1]

This Wednesday, MEPs on the ENVI committee are due to vote on a draft new EU Regulation on veterinary medicinal products, which proposes to ban the routine, preventative ‘mass-medication’ of groups of entirely healthy farm animals via their feed or water. This form of administration is currently legal within the EU, despite the EU’s European Medicines Agency opposing such use. [2]

The letter, published in *The Telegraph* [today] includes signatories from some of the most respected health professionals and scientists within the UK, including the director of the Wellcome Trust, the president of The Royal Society of Medicine, and the chair of the British Medical Association Board of Science. It states that “routine medication of groups of healthy animals is inconsistent with all responsible-use guidance”.

Professor Jane Dacre, President of the Royal College of Physicians said: *“I welcome this call for an end to the misuse of antibiotics in intensive farming. Countries like Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands which have already banned preventative mass medication have much lower levels of farm antibiotic use. The revision of the EU Veterinary Medicinal Products legislation provides a unique opportunity for other countries, like the UK, to catch up. I hope that EU policy-makers listen to the concerns of these experts when voting this week.”*

The letter comes just a few days after the publication of a report by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) which found that antimicrobial resistance in farm animals, food and certain human infections is still increasing across the EU. [3] “Extremely high” levels of resistance to the critically important fluoroquinolone antibiotics were found in human campylobacter infections. EFSA and the ECDC 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”.

Resistance to the last-resort human antibiotic colistin in *Salmonella* and *E. coli* from poultry was also found in the report. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist for ECDC, said: “This is worrying because it means that this last-resort drug may soon no longer be effective for treating severe human infections with *Salmonella*.” The signatories of the letter in [The Telegraph](#) said that the emergence of colistin resistance in farm animals and humans was “the latest sign that current veterinary prescribing practices can no longer continue”.

Emma Rose from the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics said: *“This ongoing increase in resistance levels is alarming as very few new antibiotics are being discovered to replace the ones we’re losing. It is essential that we preserve the ones we have by using them more responsibly. MEPs must vote this week to protect human and animal health and end the routine mass medication of healthy animals.”*

In Europe, it is common to routinely mass-medicate groups of intensively farmed animals for disease prevention. In the UK, group dosing of pigs and poultry accounts for nearly 90% of farm antibiotic use. [4] The UK Government recent stated that it opposes the purely preventative dosing of groups of healthy animals [5] but the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, responsible for advising the Government on farm antibiotic use, opposes banning the practice and says that on some farms with a high risk of disease it is good practice to mass medicate animals with antibiotics even when there is no sign of disease. [6]

References

1. The letter, drafted by the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics, was published in The Telegraph <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/12156778/Letters-International-interference-in-the-EU-debate-reeks-of-hypocrisy.html>
2. See http://www.ema.europa.eu/docs/en_GB/document_library/Other/2011/07/WC500109155.pdf
3. http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/press/news/layouts/forms/News_DispForm.aspx?ID=1358&List=8db7286c-fe2d-476c-9133-18ff4cb1b568&Source=http%3A%2F%2Fecdc%2Eeuropa%2Eeu%2Fen%2FPages%2Fhome%2Easpx
4. See Figure 6, p25 of ESVAC report published in 2015 http://www.ema.europa.eu/docs/en_GB/document_library/Report/2015/10/WC500195687.pdf which shows that “premixes”, “oral powders” and “oral solutions” account for nearly 90% of farm antibiotic use in the UK.
5. <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2015-12-17.20612.h&s=Antibiotics#g20612.r0>
6. In a letter to the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics in September 2015 the VMD stated that they support prophylactic (purely preventive) antibiotic use in groups of animals before clinical signs of disease appear, in circumstances where there could be a high risk of infection occurring.