

UK strategy and proactive vets and producers should stall introduction of mandatory scheme

# Reduce your antibiotic use

What is the UK's strategy for working towards ensuring the responsible use of antibiotics and addressing the challenge of antibiotic resistance? We spoke to two leading dairy vets, as well as the National Office of Animal Health, to find out what's happening now.

text **Rachael Porter**

**T**he issue of antibiotic resistance – and disease prevention with a view to reducing the need for treatment with antibiotics – has politics and science at its core, as well as cost saving and improved herd health benefits for producers. Reducing use on your unit will, inevitably, be the result of improved herd health. So what are you waiting for?

The UK's five-year strategy on antimicrobial resistance was published in September by the UK Department of Health. This strategy document was jointly produced by the Department of Health and by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The document outlines the actions required in the UK to address the challenge of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and the steps needed to address this issue in both human and veterinary medicine.

In the overall context of antimicrobial resistance and the implications for human health, the good news for producers is that the introduction to the document does contain the following statement:

'Increasing scientific evidence suggests that the clinical issues with antimicrobial resistance that we face in human medicine are primarily the result of antibiotic use in people, rather than antibiotics in animals'.

It seems that livestock producers are no longer the scapegoats when it comes to resistance issues in human medicine. That said, everyone involved in agriculture and in the animal health industry acknowledges the need for a true 'one health' approach with both human and veterinary medical professionals and researchers working together to help slow down the development of resistance by reducing the need for antimicrobials to be used and, where their use is required, by using them in a responsible manner.

## Strategy goal

The National Office of Animal Health's (NOAH) technical executive Donal Murphy says that the overall goal of the strategy is to slow the development and spread of antimicrobial resistance by improving the knowledge and understanding of resistance and conserving and maintaining the effectiveness of existing treatments. It is also trying to create an environment that will help to stimulate the development of new antibiotics, diagnostic tests and alternatives to antibiotics for the treatment of people and animals.

"There is a focus on the need for more research in the development of new antimicrobials and also the development of diagnostics to enable quick accurate disease diagnosis. This would help

vets to, firstly, decide whether an antimicrobial is needed and, secondly, to decide on an appropriate choice of antimicrobial for the condition they are treating," he says.

In relation to the use of veterinary medicines in agriculture, the strategy document acknowledges much of the good work that has already been done to promote responsible use of antibiotics and disease prevention and bio-security, by organisations like the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and by the Responsible use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA).

"There are calls for an increase in the level of access to relevant training on responsible use of medicines for producers and their staff. Another message is the encouragement to livestock producers to adhere to guidance on bio-security, animal husbandry and farm health planning to reduce disease risk, so removing the





need for treatment with antimicrobials where it is possible to do so. “While many producers already do this, the strategy wishes to see continued ongoing focus on disease prevention,” adds Mr Murphy.

Another area within the document of relevance to producers is an aim for exploration of the options for collection and analysis of veterinary medicines prescription data including the use of local audits. Essentially what this means is that there will be more focus on seeing what and where antimicrobials are being used and in what quantities. A similar scheme is already mandatory in The Netherlands.

While vets and producers are already required to maintain vet medicine records there may in future be greater collection and analysis of this data.

“Most producers will already be aware of what is required from their perspective – continued focus on disease prevention



*Ed Hewitt: “Producer attitudes are changing”*



*James Allcock: “We’re analysing our data”*



*Donal Murphy: “A ‘one health’ approach is needed”*

using farm bio-security and vaccines, appropriate housing design and animal husbandry to prevent disease where possible are essential. Where antimicrobials are prescribed then the vet’s instructions must be followed accurately and the use needs to be recorded, as is already required by law.” He adds that the Department of Health will work with Defra to develop a programme for implementation of the strategy. A work programme will be developed with time scales for delivery of actions and an annual update report on progress, outputs and outcomes will be produced.

“By working with their vet to develop and use appropriate farm health plans, producers can help to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of antimicrobials. And vets will be able to access these important medicines to maintain animal health and welfare where they are required.”

### **Proactive approach**

Vet James Allcock, from Shropshire-based XL Vets practice Lambert Leonard and May, says that he’s disappointed by how many progressive producers still miss opportunities to prevent infectious diseases through the use of vaccines and changes in husbandry. “But I think that’s our fault – some vets have been too compliant and helpful at times. And we have helped to create a culture where quick fixes with antimicrobials seem like the easy option.

“Now we’re actively working towards changing that and increasing respect for antibiotics, which are invaluable and must be treated as such.”

A proactive approach should help to stave off any mandatory schemes and satisfy the requirements of the UK strategy.

“A system of record keeping is already in place in both vet practices and on farm. And there is some potential to tighten things up a little. We’re just talking about a step change.”

“We’ve introduced several measures

at our practice already, which are all designed to ‘start a conversation’ with our clients about antibiotics. For example, we now stick a black-and-yellow hazard label on ‘at risk’ antimicrobials, such as the fluoroquinolones. Producers ask what the label is for and we say it’s a reminder to use it strictly in line with the instructions of the prescribing vet.”

### **Data analysis**

The practice has also looked at client data and antibiotic use on a per-head-of-cattle basis. “We identified the top 10% of producers and spoke to them about their use of antibiotics. Just bringing it to their attention makes them more mindful of their usage and we’re also working with them to improve disease prevention through husbandry and better management.”

Training and hands-on seminars are also on offer and advice on reducing antibiotic use also features in the practice’s newsletter. “We talk about the average spend for a typical unit. We get them thinking about how much disease and antibiotics are costing their business – and how much they could save,” says Mr Allcock.

Vet Ed Hewitt, from the Ayrshire-based XL Vets practice Armour Vet Centre, agrees that producers need to be actively educated about the appropriate use of antibiotics and the importance of protecting the efficacy of these products. “We don’t prescribe many of the more contentious antibiotics, such as the fluoroquinolones. We tend to prescribe a lot of vaccines and encourage a more proactive and preventative approach to disease control so producers won’t need to use antibiotics.”

He says that producer attitudes to antibiotics are changing and the more progressive herds are reducing their use: “Whether that’s because they don’t want disease or they don’t want to use antibiotics, it’s hard to tell. Either way, if they’re preventing disease and reducing their use of antibiotics it’s a win. |