

VMD RESPONSE TO SOIL ASSOCIATION PRESS RELEASE

“DRUGS COULD BE ILLEGAL”

On 27 May 2003 the Soil Association issued a press release about the use of antimicrobial growth promoters on farms working to the Assured Chicken Production Scheme Standards. Concerns have been raised about some of the statements made by the Soil Association and the VMD has prepared this paper in response to those concerns relating to the legal use of antimicrobial growth promoters.

“The way in which some drugs are being used on poultry farms could be illegal” “It is estimated by the Soil Association that the vast majority of the chicken sold in the UK may be affected.”

This statement could suggest that the use of antimicrobial growth promoters is illegal. In fact, they are not considered as drugs as they are authorised under different legislation as products intended for the improvement of growth and feed efficiency. This authorisation applies across the whole of the EU and products have been authorised only after having satisfied a safety assessment. At the level permitted in feedingstuffs they do not adversely affect human or animal health or the environment.

“They claim they are needed to control disease, but using these drugs in this way is not permitted in the EU since they have never been evaluated for safety as veterinary medicines.”

These products have been evaluated for safety as feed additives, and are safe when administered in accordance with the manufacturers instructions. They are not authorised as medicines to control disease, yet it has become clear, following the local voluntary ban on all antimicrobial growth promoters in countries such as Denmark and Sweden, that a consequence of the improved performance achieved through the legal use of some growth promoting products, is a suppression of sub-clinical disease. Therefore, when used to enhance growth, a degree of prevention from disease is inevitable, and although the specific mechanism by which such products act is unclear, it is obvious they are beneficial to the animal's health in some circumstances.

The Soil Association has asked Mrs Beckett to take action and in a written reply she has accepted that current use ‘could be illegal under EU legislation.’

There has been some confusion about this statement. The use of these products as growth promoters is legal. Despite antimicrobial growth promoters being authorised and legally available for use in the UK, Assured Chicken Production initially made a condition of their Standard for the rearing of chickens that antimicrobial growth promoters should not be used. To address the animal welfare problems that arose as a result of this restriction, whilst wishing to maintain control over the use of antimicrobial growth promoters, Assured Chicken Production revised its Standard to allow their use only on the instruction of a veterinary surgeon, who considers the

welfare reasons justify their use. We have written to Assured Chicken Production seeking clarification of this.

“Antibiotic growth promoters are set to be banned in Europe in 2006, but corrected Government figures show British producers are still heavily reliant on them.”

Growth promoter use will cease within the EU from 1 January 2006 and in the interim, producers will need to consider the management/husbandry changes that will be necessary to ensure the welfare of their birds is not compromised after this date. The latest antimicrobial sales figures for the UK show that 43 tonnes of antimicrobial growth promoters were sold in 2001. Only two out of the four antimicrobial growth promoters in these figures are authorised for use in chickens.

“Sales have fallen by just 6% in four years - not 74% as previously claimed by the Government - while the use of other closely related drugs under veterinary prescription has gone up dramatically.”

The sales figures for previous years were re-calculated and re-published in the 2001 Sales Report. Comparison of old and revised figures is not valid. It is not clear what the Soil Association mean by “other closely related drugs” but, as veterinary medicines are authorised for use under separate legislation and are being used under veterinary prescription, their use can be considered both legal and safe.

“It is very unfortunate that the intensive poultry industry is trying to deceive the public in this way and not preparing for the 2006 deadline.”

Defra staff are working with the industry’s Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA), which includes the British Poultry Council, to ensure veterinary medicines are used responsibly. Details of the work of RUMA can be found on the website (www.ruma.org.uk). RUMA has issued comprehensive guidance for poultry farmers and poultry veterinarians on the responsible use of antimicrobials in poultry rearing. The chicken sector is progressing towards the complete phase-out of antibiotic growth promoters by 2006. The Assured Chicken Production’s strict requirements would appear to demonstrate a responsible and controlled approach to achieving that phase-out without harming animal welfare in the short term.

“Antibiotic growth promoters will be banned due to concern about antibiotic resistant superbugs passing from animals to humans.”

In the light of current knowledge, the antimicrobial growth promoters that were a possible cause for concern for human health were removed from the market some time ago. The UK Government is satisfied that the four remaining antimicrobial growth promoters are **not** related to any therapeutic antibiotics currently used in human or veterinary medicine. Nevertheless, the UK supports the phasing out of these last four antimicrobials on a **precautionary** basis.

“Antibiotics are most widely used where chickens are kept in cramped and damp conditions, with no natural ventilation, where disease spread rapidly.”

Antimicrobial veterinary medicines are correctly and widely used where disease is present. However, in such cases, chickens are treated with veterinary medicines, not antimicrobial growth promoters. It is clear that a consequence of the use of antimicrobial growth promoters is improved animal health, but these products are not intended for the treatment of a pre-existing condition.

**Veterinary Medicines Directorate
May 2003**