

SALES OF ANTIMICROBIAL PRODUCTS FOR USE AS VETERINARY MEDICINES, GROWTH PROMOTERS, COCCIDIOSTATS AND ANTIPROTOZOALS IN THE UK IN 2001

VMD RESPONSE TO COMMENTS ON THE SALES FIGURES BY THE SOIL ASSOCIATION AND SEAN POULTER IN A DAILY MAIL ARTICLE ON 14 APRIL 2003

Introduction

1. The annual antimicrobial sales data report was published on Thursday 10 April and is the fourth in a series of reports designed to provide information about the sales of veterinary antimicrobial products in the UK. Only one other EU country, Denmark, publishes annual reports on the sale/use of antimicrobials in animals. Sweden and Finland also publish data but not on an annual basis.
2. The VMD has considered the press release issued by the Soil Association and the Daily Mail article and sets out its response below.

Soil Association Press Release of 14 April 2003 - Government breaks promise on farm antibiotics

3. The structure of the VMD's response to this press release is to repeat each paragraph of the press release followed by VMD comment in italics.

Latest figures from the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) show that the Government has failed to live up to its promise to reduce the use of antibiotics on farms.

It is incorrect to interpret a Government aim as a promise. The Government's aim is to reduce the use of antimicrobials on farm as part of its overall strategy of managing the risk to humans from antimicrobial resistance. The Government is continuing to work with farmers and vets to achieve this aim. Animals do become ill and need to be treated both for animal welfare and consumer safety reasons, no-one can predict what disease outbreaks will occur in any particular year.

On a point of detail the Soil Association refer to the use of antibiotics on farms throughout their press release. The figures in the report cover antimicrobials (i.e. any medicine that has a controlling effect on bacteria), not just antibiotics (i.e. medicines administered with the specific intention of killing bacteria) and include those used in pet and companion animals.

They show that the overall quantity of antibiotics used in food producing animals rose from 452 tonnes of active ingredient in 1998 to 463 tonnes in 2001, the latest year for which figures are available.

The numbers quoted here are an aggregation of the tonnages of antimicrobial products sold for therapeutic use in food producing animals and the tonnages of growth promoters sold. The figures are correct.

This contrasts starkly with Government statements at that time. On 19 February 2001 Baroness Hayman, then Secretary of State at MAFF referring to the figures for 1999 and said, "These figures confirm that the Government is succeeding in getting across its message on the importance of reducing the use of antibiotics on farms".

The 2001 sales report says that data from 1998 to 2000 have been restated following a comprehensive review of the methods used to calculate the quantity of antimicrobial active ingredient in each product and the categories under which the product sales are reported. It is disingenuous, therefore, to use a historical quotation out of context and commenting on a comparison of figures prior to revision. On the publication of the 2001 report Elliot Morley the Parliamentary Under Secretary (Commons) of Defra said that publication of this report underlines the Government's commitment to full transparency on this issue, and to promoting the prudent use of antimicrobials in animals.

Use of therapeutic antibiotics (used at both low levels to prevent, and high levels to treat, disease) rose from 406 tonnes in 1998 to 420 tonnes in 2001, while the use of antibiotics for growth promotion fell by just 6% from 46 to 43 tonnes.

The numbers quoted in this paragraph are accurate. However, a year on year comparison shows a 3% fall in the sale of therapeutic antimicrobials for food producing animals from 431 tonnes in 2000 to 420 tonnes in 2001. The same comparison for growth promoters is not possible because of missing data in 2000.

The UK Government has agreed with other EU member states that all antibiotic growth promoters must be phased out by 1 January 2006, yet it appears that intensive livestock producers in the UK have not yet begun to reduce their dependence on these drugs.

The UK Government supports the proposal that the remaining 4 antibiotic growth promoters should be phased out by 1 January 2006. Countries who have already banned the use of antibiotic growth promoters e.g. Denmark and Sweden have experienced a subsequent increase in the use of therapeutic antimicrobials. VMD is working with the Responsible use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA) to minimise any increase in the use of therapeutic

antimicrobials following the proposed ban of antibiotic growth promoters in 2006.

Four antibiotic growth promoters were banned in 1999 due to concern that their continuing use would compromise the treatment of the hospital superbug, VRE (Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci), which causes wound infections and can be a particular problem in kidney units. Principal among these were the macrolide drugs tylosin and spiramycin. While macrolides are no longer formally used as 'growth promoters' their use under veterinary prescription has risen from 23 tonnes in 1998 to 55 tonnes in 2001, which suggests that more is now being used than before the growth promoting ban.

The VMD acknowledges that "Macrolide antimicrobial products showed the largest increase in sales" and that "The majority of the sales comprised medicated feedingstuffs for use in pigs".

The increase in the sale of therapeutic macrolide antimicrobial products reflects the same experience seen in other countries where the use of macrolides as growth promoters has been banned.

In addition sales of coccidiostats, several of which are also antibiotics but which are listed separately, also rose, from 216 tonnes in 2000 to 242 tonnes in 2001. These are too toxic for use in human medicine so antibiotic resistance is of less concern than the presence of residues in food. About 4% of all eggs and 10% of all chicken liver tested in the UK contain residues of coccidiostats.

Coccidiostats are used for the prevention of coccidiosis, a common parasitic disease in both extensively and intensively reared poultry. It is not correct to say that they are too toxic for human medicine as some are used for this purpose e.g. amprolium, diclazuril and sulfadimidine a long acting sulphonamide. The VMD includes surveillance for residues of coccidiostats in their statutory monitoring programme and reports all results in MAVIS. None of the levels found has been a concern to human health - the FSA is on record as stating that nicarbazin in particular is a food contamination rather than a food safety issue. The Veterinary Residues Committee has a sub-group which is looking at ways of eliminating the higher concentrations of residues of coccidiostats from foodstuffs.

Richard Young, Soil Association Policy Advisor said, "The Government is attempting to put a positive spin on the situation but the reality is that the intensive livestock industry is just as hooked on drugs today as it was five years ago and unless agricultural policy is used to move the entire industry away from the intensive approach and towards the more natural production methods used on organic farms the use of antibiotics is not likely to fall in any significant way".

Whatever production system is used animals do suffer from diseases and need to be treated both for animal welfare and consumer safety reasons. Antimicrobials play an important role in ensuring that both

intensively and extensively reared animals remain healthy but inevitably there are dangers of resistant bacteria developing following the use of antimicrobial medicines. This applies in both human and veterinary medicine. Prudent and responsible use of these medicines will preserve their effectiveness and help protect humans and animals from disease.

4. **Daily Mail Article - Farm Growth Drug Scandal by Sean Poulter**

Mr Poulter has used the growth promoter sales figures for 2000 and 2001 to claim that farmers are increasingly using antibiotics to fatten up livestock despite the threat to human health. He says the use of the antibiotics has increased by up to 90%. According to Mr Poulter the implications for human medicine are huge [as] these chemicals are directly linked to the creation of superbugs which doctors are now struggling to defeat. He says that while the VMD warns the figures may be skewed by incomplete information from earlier years, it makes clear that many farmers are using chemicals to artificially pump up livestock.

The VMD report includes the following table on which Mr Poulter based his article:

Table 3: Sales of antimicrobial growth-promoting products (tonnes active ingredient) in the UK 1998 - 2001

	1998	1999*	2000*	2001
	Tonnes Active Ingredient			
Growth Promoting Products	46	23*	24*	43

*missing data

This table makes it clear that there is missing data for 1999 and 2000 which makes the comparison of these years with other years inappropriate as the comparison is not of like with like. The growth promoters concerned are those which are based on active ingredients not used in human medicine so they are not relevant to the treatment of human patients. These numbers indicate a slight decline in the use of growth promoters between 1998 and 2001. Mr Poulter's statement "it makes it clear that many farmers are using chemicals to artificially pump up livestock" is misleading and the VMD has not made, nor does it support, this statement.

Veterinary Medicines Directorate
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