

12 November 2012

David Heath MP  
Minister of State for Agriculture  
Defra  
Nobel House  
17 Smith Square  
London  
SW1P 3JR

Please reply to Richard Young, Soil Association, South Plaza,  
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Dear Minister,

In a written Parliamentary answer on 15 October you stated, 'The Government has long promoted the responsible use of antibiotics in veterinary medicine'. Recently published data from the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, however, shows that sales of fluoroquinolone antibiotics for use in veterinary medicine over the last two years have been 70% higher than they were in 2000.

Fluoroquinolones are classified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as 'critically important in human medicine' because of their importance for treating severe and invasive infections, including those caused by campylobacter, salmonella and E. coli. They are one of only two classes of antibiotics which can be used to treat serious campylobacter infections.

In a report last year the WHO stated, 'the use of enrofloxacin, a fluoroquinolone, in food animals has resulted in the development of resistance in Salmonella and Campylobacter to ciprofloxacin, a fluoroquinolone used to treat people. Such resistant bacteria have subsequently caused infections in people. Similarly, resistant E. coli can spread from animals to people through the food-chain'.

In a review of the scientific evidence published in 2008, the European Food Safety Authority drew largely similar conclusions, and added 'A major source of human exposure to fluoroquinolone resistance via food appears to be poultry'. Use of fluoroquinolones in poultry production is of the greatest concern for two reasons: first, it is invariably a whole flock rather than an individual bird that is treated, second, chicken is a major source of campylobacter food poisoning.

The quantity of these antibiotics being used now is very much the same as it was in the late 1990s, when the House of Lords' Select Committee on Science and Technology under the chairmanship of Lord Soulsby drew attention to the rise in fluoroquinolone resistance in campylobacter infections in people and linked this to the veterinary use of these antibiotics. In its 1998 report the committee stated, 'mass treatment of herds of pigs or flocks of poultry with such agents cannot be best practice from the point of view of human health.'

Recently published data from the European Medicines Agency (EMA), set out in the accompanying briefing paper, gives a strong indication that a high proportion of fluoroquinolone use in veterinary medicine is for oral administration in poultry production. Because of the way in which published data in the UK is presented it has not been possible to draw such a conclusion before.

This would help explain why 20% of campylobacter isolated from retail chicken in the most recent Food Standards Agency Survey were resistant to fluoroquinolones and why almost half of all campylobacter infections in people are now resistant to fluoroquinolones.

The House of Lords called for the rapid introduction of a 'Code of Practice on when such compounds should be prescribed and how'. It added, 'We recommend self-regulation in preference to legislation'. Due to the publicity which the House of Lords' report attracted there was a large fall in use in 2000, but in the absence of Government action or independent scrutiny, that fall has been reversed.

Since it is clear that voluntary action by the industry has been ineffective in reducing fluoroquinolone use, we now call upon you to work with the European Commission and other Member States to introduce new legislation to prohibit the use of these critically important antibiotics in poultry production, and ensure they are only used in other farm animal species in strictly controlled situations. We recognize this could result in a small increase in the retail price of chicken, but we believe that people would be willing to pay a little more to reduce the risks to their health and help safeguard the effectiveness of such an important class of antibiotics into the future.

Several countries have already taken action to limit fluoroquinolone use: the US banned their use in poultry in 2005; Denmark has used no fluoroquinolones in poultry since 2010; Finland never licensed their use in poultry and Australia uses no fluoroquinolones at all in any animal species. These countries have shown that it is possible to have a profitable poultry industry without the use of fluoroquinolones.

In the accompanying paper, *Fluoroquinolone use in poultry and antibiotic resistance in people*, we provide additional information which expands on the points in this letter. The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics welcomes Government initiatives to reduce inappropriate prescribing of antibiotics in human medicine and would like to see similar action in relation to veterinary medicines. We would welcome an opportunity to discuss these issues with you.

In view of the public interest in this issue we will be making this letter publically available.

Yours sincerely,



Richard Young  
Policy Advisor, Soil Association  
On behalf of the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics