Monday 17th October 2016

Massive overuse of farm antibiotics continues in Europe

New data published on Friday 14 October by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) reveals that many European countries are failing to put an end to massive overuse of antibiotics in farming [1]. Use of antibiotics in Europe remains more than twice as high in animals as in humans [2].

The O'Neill Review on antimicrobial resistance, commissioned by the UK government, recommended that high-income countries should aim for a short-term target of 50 mg of antibiotic per kg of livestock [3]. However, the EMA shows that the average European level of use is over three times higher at 152 mg/kg.

In the 25 European countries which provided comparable data, sales of farm antibiotics per unit of livestock went down by just 2% in 2014 compared with 2013 [4]. If small annual reductions of just 2% are maintained, it will take 65 years for Europe to reach the O'Neill target.

Overall use of the antibiotics classified as "critically important in human medicine" by the World Health Organization increased to record levels in 2014. Use of the antibiotic colistin, which is used in human medicine as a last-resort for treating life-threatening infections, also increased in 2014.

Cóilín Nunan, of the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, said: "The shocking overuse of farm antibiotics shown by these data is a result of the continued failure by most countries to ban routine preventative mass medication in intensive farming. Spain now uses 100 times more antibiotics per unit of livestock than Norway, 80 times more than Iceland and 35 times more than Sweden. The main reason for the difference is that Spain, like most of Europe, allows routine mass medication, whereas the Nordic countries do not. The increased use of last-resort and critically important antibiotics is particularly alarming and confirms that reliance on voluntary and softly-softly approaches is not working."

Antibiotic use in British livestock in 2014 was at similar levels to 2013 and significantly below the EU average, at 62 mg/kg. However, the main reason for apparently quite low consumption is that, compared with other countries, the UK has a very high proportion of low-consuming sheep and relatively few high-consuming pigs. The Alliance estimates that antibiotic use in British pigs is actually at around 265 mg/kg [5].

The EMA data shows that over 91% of European farm antibiotics are used for mass medication in feed or drinking water. A large proportion of this is for routine disease

prevention in intensively farmed pigs and poultry. In contrast, in Sweden, where there is no routine medication, 90% of farm antibiotic use is for individual treatments.

In January 2017, discussions are due to commence between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers on future veterinary medicines legislation. The European Parliament has proposed a ban on all routine antibiotic use, but this has not yet been accepted by the Council of Ministers or the Commission.

Cóilín Nunan said: “The British government must support the European Parliament’s proposed ban on routine mass medication in the upcoming “Trialogue” negotiations. When Brexit happens, the Prime Minister says that EU rules and regulations will be converted into British law with the Great Repeal Bill, so these negotiations are going to be hugely important for the future of British farming.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors

1. European Medicines Agency, 2016. Sales of veterinary antimicrobial agents in 29 European countries in 2014, Sixth ESVAC report, http://www.ema.europa.eu/docs/en_GB/document_library/Report/2016/10/WC500214217.pdf
2. ECDC/EFSA/EMA, 2015. First joint report on the integrated analysis of the consumption of antimicrobial agents and occurrence of antimicrobial resistance in bacteria from humans and food-producing animals, http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications/publications/antimicrobial-resistance-jiacra-report.pdf
3. Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, 2016. Tackling Drug-Resistant Infections Globally: final report and recommendations, https://amr-review.org/sites/default/files/160525_Final%20paper_with%20cover.pdf
4. Reported antibiotic sales actually went up by 8% in 2014 compared with 2013 in the 26 countries that reported data for both years. The increase, however, was due to Spain improving its data collection and consequently reporting more accurate and higher sales. The Spanish data is not therefore comparable between 2013 and 2014.
5. Accurate data on antibiotic use in British pigs is not yet available. However, Veterinary Medicines Directorate data shows that total sales of antibiotics licensed for use in pigs or poultry in 2014 was between 308 and 382 tonnes. Furthermore, data from the British Poultry Council, which represents +90% of the UK poultry meat sector shows that BPC members used 62 tonnes of active ingredient in 2014. Antibiotic use for the egg industry is not available, but is known to be much lower

than use by the poultry-meat sector, so total use by poultry farmers in 2014 is very unlikely to have been as high as 120 tonnes, suggesting that use in the pig industry must have been at least 190 tonnes. From this it can be calculated the use per kg of livestock was at least 265 mg/kg.

The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics is an alliance of health, medical, environmental and animal welfare groups working to stop the overuse of antibiotics in animal farming. It was founded by Compassion in World Farming, the Soil Association and Sustain in 2009, and is supported by the Jeremy Coller Foundation. Its vision is a world in which human and animal health and wellbeing are protected by food and farming systems that do not rely routinely on antibiotics and related drugs.

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