Momentum on resistance

THE level of interest in antimicrobial resistance generated by European Antibiotic Awareness Day, which is held each year on November 18, continues to grow. Last year’s event saw a number of developments, the most significant of which was the launch by the European Commission of an action plan against antimicrobial resistance setting out 12 ‘concrete actions’ over the next five years (VR, November 26, 2011, vol 169, p 564). This year’s event has again been accompanied by a flurry of activity, including a well-publicised warning from England’s Chief Medical Officer that ‘antibiotics are losing their effectiveness at a rate that is both alarming and irreversible – similar to global warming’.

The Department of Health, working with Defra and other government departments, is currently in the process of developing a new cross-governmental Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy and Action Plan, which it intends to publish sometime next year. Meanwhile, attention continues to focus on veterinary use of antimicrobials, as various developments have illustrated.

Most recently, earlier this month the European Parliament's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee adopted a resolution which emphasises that ‘more efforts are needed to control the use of antimicrobials in the veterinary sector’ and which ‘strongly disapproves of the uncontrolled prophylactic use of antimicrobials in animal husbandry’. It also calls on the European Commission to come up with a legislative proposal for the veterinary sector to limit the use of third- and fourth-generation antimicrobials that are critically important in human medicine (VR, November 17, 2012, vol 171, p 490).

The resolution, which was adopted unanimously by the committee, will be considered by a plenary session of the European Parliament in December. Although not binding on the Commission, it is nevertheless worrying because the Commission is currently in the process of updating legislation on veterinary medicines and has previously indicated that is considering whether the legal framework should be changed to restrict the use of antimicrobials considered critical in human medicine. More generally, it comes on the back of a series of developments in Europe and further afield which suggest that political efforts to tackle antimicrobial resistance are focusing particularly on the use of antimicrobials in animals at present when effort is needed across the board.

This is illustrated in the European Commission’s action plan itself. Although this aims to tackle the problem in both people and animals, it appears to give only qualified support to developing new antimicrobials for veterinary use and contains more actions relating to veterinary use than to use in human medicine. There is clearly a need to develop new products and preserve the efficacy of existing products for use in people, but it is also important to ensure that effective products remain available for use in animals when they are needed. Unfortunately, there seems to be a political momentum gathering around veterinary use that could be difficult to stop.

In tackling antimicrobial resistance, legislative and other measures must be evidence based. However, there is a danger, in the current political climate, that the precautionary principle might be applied inappropriately and that animal health and welfare will suffer as a result. An example might be, as the European Parliament has already suggested, there should be a ban on prophylactic use (VR, November 5, 2011, vol 169, pp 479-480). While blanket prophylaxis is clearly inappropriate, there are many situations where preventive treatment is necessary to safeguard animal health and welfare and, indeed, where withholding treatment could result in more antimicrobials having to be used. Vets need to be able to apply their clinical and professional judgement in such cases, while being fully mindful of the risks of resistance development, and it would be wrong to force them to wait for an animal to become sick before starting treatment.

Antibiotics are needed for people and animals. In practical terms, it is important to ensure that both vets and doctors use them appropriately, for example, by following guidelines on responsible use, while in political terms it currently seems particularly important that vets are seen to be doing so. Political and practical issues concerning veterinary use were considered in a contentious issues debate and some of the clinical sessions at this year’s BVA Congress (VR, October 27, 2012, vol 171, pp 418-419), while a recent symposium in London brought together medical and veterinary professionals to explore ways in which the two professions can work together more effectively in tackling a problem that is common to both (VR, October 20, 2012, vol 171, pp 391-392). Resistance is undoubtedly a problem, but it is one that needs to be addressed at a practical level rather than by knee-jerk legislation that could all too easily end up doing more harm than good.

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Antimicrobial resistance: BVA warns against ‘kneejerk reactions’

POLITICAL measures to combat antimicrobial resistance in the UK and Europe are in danger of becoming ‘kneejerk reactions that are not based on sound science’, the BVA has warned.

To mark European Antibiotic Awareness day on November 18, the BVA President, Peter Harlech Jones, delivered a webinar to over 300 veterinary surgeons entitled ‘Resisting antimicrobials – are we acting responsibly?’ The webinar, which can be viewed at www.theveterinary.net/bva-webinars, forms part of the BVA’s ongoing efforts to encourage veterinary surgeons to use antimicrobials responsibly to help preserve their efficacy. The Association continues to remind vets that they must also be seen to be using products responsibly or risk legal restrictions being imposed on their use.

Mr Jones commented: ‘Any measures to tackle antimicrobial resistance must be based on sound science. At the moment we are resisting calls from parliamentarians and pressure groups in Europe and the UK to significantly restrict a veterinary surgeon’s right to prescribe and dispense medicines according to clinical and professional judgement.’

He noted that these calls did not reflect the available science, pointing out that evidence from the USA and Denmark suggested that banning or restricting the use of certain antimicrobials in some animal species had not reduced the incidence of resistance to particular organisms in people. ‘Banning the veterinary use of antimicrobials could have a severe impact on animal health and welfare without achieving the desired impact in humans,’ he said.

He added that scientists agreed that human prescribing was more likely to have an impact on human medicine than veterinary use, but stressed that responsible prescribing was essential in both sectors.

‘We fully support measures to encourage responsible veterinary use, particularly of those classes of antimicrobial that are critical for human use such as fluoroquinolones and third- and fourth-generation cephalosporins,’ he said, noting that the BVA’s poster promoting responsible antimicrobial use (available at www.bva.co.uk) states that such medicines should be reserved for clinical conditions that respond poorly to other classes of antimicrobials and where antibiotic sensitivity has been carried out. It also states that they should not be administered systematically to groups or flocks of animals except in very specific situations.

He added: ‘Vets in the UK should be aware that the new Code of Professional Conduct states that they must be accountable for choices made on antimicrobial use. This is a very positive step forward in promoting the importance of responsible use.’

Equine toolkit
The British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) marked European Antibiotic Awareness day by launching a ‘literature-based toolkit’ for equine practitioners on the responsible use of antimicrobials. BEVA believes that effective self-regulation of the use of antimicrobials is a more suitable way forward than legislation. Its new toolkit, ‘Protect ME’, aims to help practices develop their own antimicrobial policies.

The toolkit follows the same principles as the British Small Animal Veterinary Association’s PROTECT guidelines, which were developed by the Small Animal Medicine Society, with the ‘ME’ standing for ‘Monitor’ and ‘Educate’. BEVA hopes that it will help to limit the development of resistance and demonstrate to regulatory authorities that equine veterinary surgeons play an important role in preventing multidrug resistance. The toolkit is available free to BEVA members, and comprises pamphlets, antimicrobial use tables, protocols and review forms, all of which can be downloaded from www.beva.org.uk.

Mark Bowen, associate professor of veterinary internal medicine at Nottingham vet school and one of the BEVA council members involved with developing the toolkit said: ‘We have planned our launch to coincide with European Antibiotic Awareness day as a clear mark of recognition and support. It is imperative that we all treat antimicrobial resistance with great respect to help maintain the efficacy of products remaining in our armoury. The intention of our toolkit is not to dictate practice policy, rather to provide balanced information from which practices can develop their own policies, without restricting clinical freedom.’

Other organisations marking European Antibiotic Awareness day included Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA), which encouraged vets and farmers to use the day to review whether they were using antibiotics responsibly. Like the BVA, RUMA warned that farmers and vets need to be aware of the risks to the availability of antibiotics to treat their animals and to continue to show that they use them responsibly.

The Bella Moss Foundation marked the day by issuing a poster (above) for vets and pet owners outlining principles of responsible antibiotic use. The poster can be downloaded from www.thebellamossfoundation.com/support-european-antibiotic-awareness-day-2012-11-12-2/.

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November 24, 2012 | Veterinary Record | 515