Comment

Credit where it's due

'IT'S very rare to leave a conference feeling so positive.' That's how a vet summed up last week's special meeting on antibiotic resistance as he made his way home.

Farmers and representatives from government and industry had joined vets at a joint meeting of the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA) and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate.

They had spent a day hearing how livestock farming has achieved record low usage of antibiotics.

The mood was upbeat. Some headline figures had featured on the BBC news that morning – in the last two years there has been a 27 per cent drop in the amount of antibiotics bought for use in food-producing animals in the UK (from 62 mg/kg to 45 mg/kg in 2016). As a result, the livestock sector has exceeded a government target (50 mg/kg) two years early.

Crucially, sales of the highest-priority antibiotics (those critically important for human use) had also dropped. In 2016 they accounted for less than 1 per cent of all antibiotics sold for use in animals.

The antibiotic resistance story, of course, is a complex one, and these headline figures do not tell the full story. For a start, they represent overall reductions and some sectors have achieved more progress than others – poultry is ahead, the cattle sector is playing catch-up, for example.

The picture is not totally accurate either because the reduction rate is not underpinned by solid usage data – instead we have to rely heavily on sales figures. Those half-used bottles of antibiotics sometimes spotted in farm buildings serve as a regular reminder that owning antibiotics does not necessarily mean they actually end up in animals. It would be far better to rely solely on usage data, which farmers are obliged to record, and that is the ambition.

These matters aside, real progress is being made. And it is this progress that is helping to entrench the UK's position as a leading authority on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) on the global stage.

In his address to the conference, Lord Gardiner, parliamentary under-secretary at Defra, said the UK had helped secure key commitments to tackle AMR from 193 nations at the UN General Assembly in September last year. It also helped achieve new AMR international milestones at the recent G7 and G20 meetings.

Certainly there has been a shift in thinking about antibiotics at a global political level. It is now recognised that antibiotic resistance is a major threat to modern medicine – by 2050, it is estimated that AMR could be responsible for 10 million deaths per year.

This threat is driving momentum here in the UK. In the world of human medicine, the NHS has been working hard to reduce antibiotic use with good results – between 2012 and 2016 there was a 5 per cent reduction across the whole system.

Next year we can expect the Department of Health and Defra to publish another five-year strategy (to replace their 2013 report), setting out further government-wide initiatives.

In the food animal sector there is now recognition that each is different in terms of its shape and size, level of integration and quality of usage data and therefore each needs its own antibiotic reduction targets to work towards. These were announced last week (see pp 464-465).

For many involved, it feels like a great deal of distance has been travelled since the 2015 RUMA conference. Back then, the food animal sector was not actively engaged with this issue across the board and perhaps rather burned by a series of media reports that had painted farming as the main cause of the AMR problem. There was also a very real threat – targets, and perhaps even antibiotic bans, could be imposed.

It marked a turning point – there was realisation that everyone involved in food animal farming – from producers to suppliers and from the pharmaceutical industry to the veterinary profession – needed to recognise the problem and do something about it.

Fast forward to RUMA 2017 and the level of debate had matured. Instead of blaming other countries for slack antibiotic usage or human medicine for failing to do its bit, conversation was solutions-focused. The narrative was about collaboration, cross-sector working, sharing resources and heading towards a goal that must be achieved.

Vets have been critical in this change of mindset. While the quality of veterinary leadership is often the subject of debate (see p 483), here is a good, live example of veterinary leadership at its best.

Nine vets were part of a targets taskforce, a group facilitated by RUMA to negotiate the food animal sector targets that were announced last week.

For those involved, it was a hard slog. It meant challenging sectors, advocating for change, brokering deals, driving decision-making. It also required a lot of time and personal commitment.

It is right to credit them here. They are (in alphabetical order) Elizabeth Berry, Christian Blake-Dyke, Javier Dominguez, John Fishwick, Fiona Lovatt, Paul McMullin, Daniel Parker, Ronnie Soutar and Mark White.

The fight against AMR is taking place on a number of levels – global, national and sector level. In terms of food animals, vets are really emerging as key influencers and their focus must be on consistent responsible use of antibiotics – improving the way they are prescribed, reducing their unnecessary use.

But rather than being seen as somebody who just prescribes a product, there is a growing recognition of the different expertise vets can bring. Vets are experts who can assess, advise on biosecurity, cleansing and disinfection, segregation or quarantine as well as more widely on nutrition and environment.

Of course, responsible prescribing of antibiotics affects all veterinary sectors and they are not escaping attention. The companion animal sector is also on the government's radar and was mentioned several times at last week's conference. Are unreasonable demands for antibiotics from pet owners sometimes met? What more can be done to reduce their use in everyday practice?

As prescribing gatekeeper, the vet is at the centre of this very important agenda – one with global implications and one that is perhaps never going to go away.

I left last week's conference with two words ringing in my ears – 'will' and 'challenge' Both had been used constantly throughout the day.

Is there a will to protect the antibiotics we have for future generations? Are those involved in food animal production willing to challenge each other effectively to drive down antibiotic usage? Indications are that the answer is a resounding 'yes'. And vets are in the driving seat.

Adele Waters

doi: 10.1136/vr.j5077