Veterinarians and farmers care for animals and people

“Responsible use of antibiotics in food-producing animals – How can this be ensured?”

Antibiotic resistance in animals – much like in their human counterparts – is becoming a greater challenge every day. Antibiotic resistance occurs when certain bacteria are able to “resist” and survive after they have been exposed to a specific antibiotic that would normally be expected to kill them or inhibit their growth.

Antibiotics are not always the answer
Antibiotics are used in animals for the same reason as for people: they are vital to treat and control diseases. Protecting the health of animals helps to protect human health. But the risk that the organism causing the disease will develop resistance to them increases every time they are used. To make sure that the limited antibiotics available on the market stay effective now and in the future, they must be used with caution and only on veterinary prescription. Not every infectious disease requires antibiotic treatment (e.g. viral infections).

Prevention is better than cure
One of the best things to do to prevent use of antibiotics is to ensure that animals are kept healthy, by guaranteeing good hygiene, proper housing and ventilation, feed with a high nutritional value, and, where available, use of vaccines as part of a good prevention and control strategy. Mixing animals with different health statuses should be avoided, but if necessary particular care should be taken when doing so. Remember always that “stress” is a killer. Antibiotics should never replace good husbandry, hygiene and management practices.

Diagnostic tests might be needed
In order for your veterinarian to know whether treatment with antibiotics is really necessary and, if so, which antibiotic will work best, a laboratory test is often advisable and in some cases even essential (e.g. use of critically important antibiotics). Your veterinarian will then be able to prescribe the right antibiotic to fight the bacteria effectively. Older types of antibiotics, such as penicillins, can be as effective as the more modern drugs.

New and critically important antibiotics must be strictly controlled
Farmer and veterinarians have to work together to prevent the development of resistance to antibiotics classed as “critically important” or to new antimicrobials for as long as possible. These antibiotics should only be prescribed and used by veterinarians as a very last resort, based on appropriate sensitivity test. Using antibiotics off label or via the cascade should be avoided wherever possible, and used always on the instructions of a veterinarian.

Do not medicate your animal yourself
Do not use antibiotics for diseases other than those they are prescribed for or after they have passed their use-by-date. They can be inappropriate for the current condition, out of date, contraindicated or contaminated. Only veterinarians can prescribe antibiotics for animals, following an examination and clinical diagnosis. Never source antibiotics outside the legal channels.

Follow the dosage and instructions
Make sure that your animals get all the recommended doses of an antibiotic as prescribed by your veterinarian, even if they get better. Not only will this help to clear up the current infection, but it will also help to keep the bacteria from discovering a new way of becoming resistant to the antibiotic. Always respect the withdrawal time in order to ensure that no residues remain before the meat or milk enters the food chain.

Keep your treatments records in order
Improving antibiotic use requires the transparency and responsibility of all relevant operators, including farmers and veterinarians. Both farmers and veterinarians play an important role in keeping accurate records of treatments administered, and use these records for further assessments and possible adjustments to future treatments.

Open dialogue between veterinarians and farmers (Farm Health Management Programme)
Safe food is produced by healthy animals. Health and welfare are greatly influenced by the way animals are kept and raised. At the level of primary production, the farmer has a key responsibility to guarantee that animals satisfy the requirements of animal health and welfare provisions. An open dialogue between farmers and veterinarians is vital to ensure healthy and productive animals. To support the farmer in such an activity, the development of a Farm Health Management Programme tailored to the specific needs of the farm may be considered, in order to guarantee good management of disease risk on farm and ensure expertise when risks and irregularities are detected on farm. If you have worries or questions in relation to antibiotic resistance, do not hesitate to discuss these with your veterinarian.