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Letters

ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE

Use and misuse of antimicrobials

ANTIMICROBIAL resistance is a global health problem of growing concern. In 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that over the past 70 years the use and misuse of antimicrobials in human and animal medicine has led to a 'relentless rise' in the number and types of resistant micro-organisms. Every use of an antimicrobial can increase the risk of the development of microbial resistance, the consequences of which are severe for animals and people.

An indication of the severity and scope of the problem is that the WHO chose antimicrobial resistance as its theme for this year's World Health Day (April 7) (www.who.int/world-health-day/2011/en/index.html). As part of this initiative, the WHO adopted the tagline 'No action today, no cure tomorrow' and launched a worldwide campaign to safeguard antimicrobials for future generations. Indeed, the WHO has publicly stated that we might be moving into a post-antibiotic era.

The BVA and the British Medical Association (BMA) support the WHO's call to action, and urge all vets and doctors to ensure that they are using antimicrobials responsibly. It is equally important that non-medical and non-veterinary use is seriously restricted.

The BVA and BMA have repeatedly highlighted how poor prescribing practice and the misuse of antimicrobials can lead to the emergence of drug-resistant infections. Promoting optimal antimicrobial prescribing in clinical practice requires improved professional education, tailored local information, and close collaboration between all parties in both the medical and veterinary professions.

Animals need medicines to ensure their health and welfare, which in turn provides safe food for the consumer. In recognition of this, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has developed a list of critically important antimicrobials, which defines all classes of antimicrobials as being essential for the successful treatment of bacterial diseases.

What is clear is the need for responsible use of these important medicinal products in human and animal health, and both organisations have produced materials on responsible use, which can be accessed via the BVA and BMA websites. Unless vets and doctors recognise the importance of working together, we could all be faced with a world in which we are unable to control infectious diseases. Antimicrobial resistance does not respect the boundaries between animal and human medicine and a holistic approach is the only way that we can tackle this challenge.

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