

## Chicken firm slashes antibiotic use through holistic remedies



Experts in poultry health have helped one of the UK's largest food businesses to slash its antibiotic usage in the past two years, by adopting an holistic approach to animal well-being.

St David's Poultry Team have been working with Faccenda Foods to look at innovative ways of maintaining the health of the birds on farm, and limit the need for medication. Turning to natural remedies including probiotics and essential oils is really paying off, with a 70% reduction in antibiotic usage over the past two years.

"Antimicrobial resistance is a world human health issue," explains Richard Turner, director at St David's Poultry Team. "Antibiotic use in agriculture is also a growing concern for consumers so it's really important that we focus on it."

Working across all 80 of the firm's farms, St David's introduced bespoke management practices to maximise bird health, starting by treating new-born chicks with probiotics to encourage healthy gut development. "Humans use probiotics to support their gut health, we are just adapting that technology for use in poultry," explains Mr Turner.

St David's also recommended that Faccenda analyse its water and add in natural acids to keep it as clean as possible, with a yeast extract going into the chicken feed to bind any 'bad' bacteria in the gut and reduce the risk of infection taking hold.

"We call this approach seed, weed and feed," explains Mr Turner. "We seed the gut with healthy bacteria using probiotics, weed out 'bad' bacteria and feed the 'good' bacteria with natural acids. The more healthy bacteria there are in the gut, the more competition there is against the bad ones which cause sickness."

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The protocols have proven such a success over the past five years that St David's recently launched a new company – Applied Bacterial Control – to work with farmers to reduce antibiotic usage across all livestock sectors.

Regular vet visits mean the farmers are able to act quickly should there be a health challenge, with an array of natural products available to get the birds back on track.

“It's like a Holland & Barrett approach to bird health,” says David Neilson, general manager for agriculture at Faccenda.

“We use essential oils, oregano and garlic: If the chickens get an upset tummy we use natural oils to help them recover, rather than going straight in with antibiotics.”

However, Mr Neilson warns against any drive for completely antibiotic free production. “Our antibiotic use is so low it's almost unmeasurable, but if the birds need antibiotics to protect their welfare they must receive them.

“Our bird health and productivity is significantly better under this new approach - ultimately their welfare is the key to the whole system.”

Faccenda has adopted a similar approach across its duck and turkey farms, and the wider industry has also been working to reduce antibiotic usage since 2011, when the British Poultry Council launched its antibiotic stewardship scheme.

Headed by Faccenda's agricultural director, Reg Smith, this aims to encourage the recording and reduction of antibiotics in poultry farms across the UK.

As a result, the industry slashed its antibiotic use by 44% between 2012 and 2015, while increasing production by 5%. “The scheme has been a great success, but there's no reason why we can't achieve even more,” says Mr Neilson.

“We need investment in new products, technology and knowledge transfer to drive down antibiotic use and improve bird health further. This is a legacy we can pass onto future generations; we can all work together to solve common challenges.”

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