CMO PRAISES INDUSTRY PROGRESS BUT STRESSES JOB IS ‘HALF DONE’

The Government’s Chief Medical Officer was fulsome in her praise for the pig industry, but said the job was only ‘half done’, as she opened the roundtable event.

Dame Sally Davies stressed that the problem of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a global one, but said the UK pig sector should be proud of the role it is playing in tackling it.

Addressing guests, who included Chief Veterinary Officer Christine Middlemiss, she set out why the Government is taking the issue so seriously, citing the dire warnings contained in the 2016 O’Neill report about dire the implications of leaving AMR unchecked (see page 15).

“I am here because we are talking One Health. Christine and I are joined at the hip about how we work on this and what we do together,” Dame Sally said, explaining that the One Health approach is about ensuring ‘we all work together’ to use antibiotics appropriately in humans, pets and livestock.

“Let me be quite clear – the problem is biggest in human use and misuse of antibiotics. I recognise that and I am not into blaming our animal sector,” she added. “But over 70% of antibiotics used in the world are used by the farming community and the vast majority – 75% of that – is used for growth promotion and prophylaxis, rather than treating sick animals.”

Dame Sally, who has warned of a ‘post-antibiotic apocalypse’, highlighted concerns about how antibiotics continue to be overused, and used irresponsibly, worldwide, notably Asia and the Pacific region.

The UK Government established the £50 million Global AMR Innovation Fund to help find solutions to the problem and Dame Sally stressed the importance of awareness campaigns being run by global bodies like the World Health Organisation, the World Organisation for Animal Health, and the Food and Agricultural Organisation.

Turning to the UK, Dame Sally acknowledged the factors that have contributed to high historic use in the pig sector, including reliance on feed medication, a range of chronic bacterial disease and immune-compromising diseases and low profit margins and underinvestment in buildings.

But she praised the partnership approach, incorporating vets, producers, other parts of the industry and Government, that has driven the impressive reductions seen over the past two years. She highlighted the ‘key role’ played by RUMA and its Target Task Force, led by veterinary and producer representatives in setting targets across the livestock sectors.

Dame Sally suggested that the human

AHDB and Pig World brought together representatives from across Government and the pig industry at a roundtable event to explore the future of veterinary medicine and antibiotics in pig production.

The event, at the Farmers Club, in London, combined expert presentations with group discussion and covered a huge amount of ground – from the political context to the science of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and the practical steps the pig industry needs to take to meet the next stage of the antibiotic challenge.

If there was one overarching message from the producers, vets, industry leaders, allied industry representatives, scientists and key Government figures in attendance, it was that this is a collective effort. As Dame Sally Davies said: “We are all in this together.”

AHDB’s senior veterinary manager Mandy Nevel said: “This was a very constructive event, bringing the industry together to discuss the goals of improving pig health and welfare and further reducing our reliance on antibiotics. Plenty of good ideas were exchanged and the event highlighted, yet again, that this is a joint effort.”

Bringing people together to discuss antibiotics
The UK pig sector is in a considerably stronger position on responsible use of antibiotics than it was two years ago, according to Gwyn Jones, chair of the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture (RUMA) alliance.

“The glowing recognition the industry received from the Chief Medical Officer Dame Sally Davies at this event is testament to that. But let’s be clear – there’s more to do,” Mr Jones told Pig World.

“Whether we like it or not, our pig sector remains under the spotlight because its average antibiotic use is considerably greater than in a number of other countries. While comparisons may feel irrelevant because of different markets, productivity and systems, they will inevitably be made.

“So we need to be in a strong position to show we record accurately and know what we use and why, and that routine preventative or other inappropriate use of antibiotics is being progressively eliminated.”

The task is not easy because UK pig producers face particular hurdles, Mr Jones added.

“We have a highly productive and cost-effective sector that can compete internationally. But we also have some specific disease issues – like PRRS.

“We deliver high welfare pork from a wide range of systems not commonly seen in other EU countries, which creates health challenges others don’t have to deal with.

“And, of course, the sector has not seen Pillar 2 CAP support funds made available to update infrastructure, as in other countries.”

Despite this, antibiotic records for more than 90% of pig production were lodged on the electronic medicine-book (eMB) in 2017, helping to show that usage has halved in two years.

“This is a fantastic achievement, especially as cutting use can be hard work and very demoralising at times. This is why it’s important to implement changes at a pace that can be sustained without risking animal health and welfare or food safety,” he added.

“However, we still need to press on if we are to reach the 2020 target, and show we can deliver change without regulation. We should also expect targets beyond 2020 as necessary.”

RUMA’s efforts were recognised at the recent Antibiotic Guardian awards. It won the Prescribing & Stewardship award for its Target Task Force initiative, which set the sector targets, and the Community Communications award for its #ColostrumIsGold campaign.

• Ruma has developed a useful website: www.farmantibiotics.org providing news, facts, statistics, science and case studies on antibiotics in UK farming for the media, public, farmers and vets.

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medical sector, which she acknowledged had not made as much progress as she would have hoped, could learn lessons from the livestock sector, including the data recording achieved through eMB-Pigs.

“I am proud of how well you are doing with antibiotics. You have halved antibiotic use in two years – we are aiming by 2020 to hit 99mg/PCU and we are well on the way. You are also reducing high priority critically important antibiotics, which is very important. Use of colistin in UK agriculture, for example, is well below the 1mg/kg recommended by the European Medicines Agency. And you have done this voluntarily,” she said.

She predicted that the task would become more difficult after this initial progress, but said the industry had the co-ordination and the ‘momentum to go forward and learn from what you are doing’. She highlighted opportunities for the sector to make further progress, for example through benchmarking using eMB-Pigs and shifting from in-feed to water medication.

The Government, through its post-Brexit agricultural policy, for example, would be working with the industry to improve pig health and welfare and ‘make a difference’, she added.

“We are leaving no stone unturned to try and reduce antibiotic use to what humans and animals actually need. I know we will not get to zero – I am not aiming for zero – but we are aiming for responsible and appropriate use,” she said.

“We are making progress and I am proud of that, but we need to keep going – it is a job half done, there is further to go. It will not be easy, but it must be done.”