

Farm animal superbug – A new threat to our food?

Research just published by the Soil Association has revealed that a serious human-health threat, already present in the Netherlands and other European countries, could spread to the UK.

The 'superbug' methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is already a high-profile, persistent problem in many UK hospitals. Now a new strain of MRSA has developed amongst intensively farmed pigs, chickens and other livestock on the Continent. Farm-animal MRSA has already transferred to farmers, farm-workers and their families in the Netherlands, causing serious health impacts. 40% of Dutch pigs and 50% of pig farmers have been found to carry farm-animal MRSA.

In the Netherlands, farm-animal MRSA has been found in 20% of pork, 21% of chicken and 3% of beef on sale to the public. It has not yet been found in UK livestock or meat products, but neither the government nor the Food Standards Agency are carrying out any surveys of the most likely carriers, live pigs, chickens and imported meat. Replying to a Parliamentary Question on this issue, the minister responsible, Ben Bradshaw, dismissed the Soil Association's concerns, '*...there is no current evidence that food-producing animals form a reservoir of MRSA infection in the UK...*'.

The Dutch Minister for Agriculture, Dr C. P. Veerman thinks differently, '*It is very unlikely that 'animal-farming-related MRSA' only exists in the Netherlands, considering the animal types where MRSA is found and the many animal movements and comparable livestock farming methods in other EU member states. So far, there are no hard facts about this. It is important, for these reasons, that all Member States examine their animals.*'

Dutch scientists and government officials blame this new strain of MRSA in farm animals on the high levels of antibiotics used in intensive livestock farming. The UK government has committed itself to reducing the amount of antibiotics used in UK farming, yet overall levels remain high. Despite an EU-wide ban on growth-promoting antibiotics added to animal feed, similar quantities of antibiotics are simply being prescribed by vets for disease prevention. Additionally, the junior Minister, Ben Bradshaw MP, gave in to lobbying by the farm-drugs industry to allow continued advertising of prescription-only antibiotics to livestock farmers in defiance of an EU Directive seeking to end this practice. Now these important antibiotics are even being marketed for their growth-promoting properties.

Richard Young, Soil Association policy adviser says, '*This new type of MRSA is spreading like wildfire across Europe, and we know it is transferring from farm animals to humans – with serious health impacts. Concerned scientists have referred to this as 'a new monster'. Fortunately, it has not yet been found in UK livestock or imported meat, but then neither the government nor the Food Standards Agency are looking for it in live animals or meat.*

This is no time for official complacency, but a critical opportunity to prevent farm-animal MRSA getting a hold in the UK - so reducing risks to human health, costs to

the NHS, already burdened by hospital-acquired MRSA, and avoiding another potentially devastating food-safety crisis.'

The Soil Association is calling on the UK Government to:

- Urgently instigate a testing programme to establish the MRSA status of UK livestock and meat on sale;
- Fully implement its claimed commitment to reducing use of veterinary antibiotics – including banning advertising of all antibiotics to farmers;
- Immediately prohibit the prophylactic and off-label use of all antibiotics on farms that are defined as 'critically important' in human medicine by the World Health Organisation; Screen all farm workers and vets coming into the UK from countries where farm-animal MRSA has been found.

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