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Partnership approach to reducing antibiotic use in sheep farming

A partnership approach between livestock farmer and vet in Cornwall is demonstrating how working together can reduce antibiotic use in agriculture.

Tim Bebbington from the Castle Veterinary Group in Launceston has been working with Ed Venning, who farms at Polvethan Farm near Fowey, for 18 months as a sheep consultant.

They have been recording the farm's overall antibiotic use and creating preventative strategies to help reduce it while improving welfare.

Antimicrobial resistance is one of the biggest threats to human health – a problem that has been underlined in numerous studies from around the world.

It is an added concern in agriculture because there is a risk that antibiotics used to treat livestock may become ineffective.

Mr Bebbington said: "When the first farm antibiotics came along they were miraculous in the impact they had on farm animals.

"But the reality is that, over time, their efficacy has reduced.

"In a post-Brexit world we need to show that UK agriculture is producing food to a high standard and part of that will be a measure of antimicrobial usage.

"If we can produce evidence to show where we are and how we are acting to reduce usage we will be in a much better place."

In June, Red Tractor Beef and Lamb standards changed to reflect the industry's commitment to responsible antibiotic use on farm.

Scheme members are now required to create a written annual livestock health and performance review with the farm's vet.

This review covers a number of areas such as making recommendations on any key health or performance issues that are identified on farm.

Medicine records or prescription data outlining total antibiotic used must be used as the basis for advice on how the farm can use antibiotics as responsibly as possible without compromising animal welfare.

Disease prevention strategies which could help replace prophylactic treatment should also form part of the review.

The use of Highest Priority Critically Important Antibiotics must be a last resort and their use must be under the direction of a vet, backed up by sensitivity or diagnostic testing.

It is also recommended that at least one member of staff who administers medicines completes a training course in their handling and administration.

Mr Venning has two flocks – a Mule and Mule-X-Texel flock which lambs in February, and April-lambing Romneys – plus a herd of 50 beef cattle.

He asked Mr Bebbington to work with him because he saw a need to reduce antibiotic use on the farm and felt there would be an associated benefit with lower production costs.

Three visits a year take place – after weaning and tugging, after scanning and then at lambing.

Mr Venning said: “I think a lot of things are more targeted now, such as the use and types of wormers I use and the timings of applications. There have been some real cost savings there.

“There is a lot of talk about antibiotics and we have been working hard to reduce their use and make sure we are using the right type.

“For example, in the past I have used antibiotic footbaths and now we’re looking at managing lameness using vaccination rather than tackling problems when they appear.”

Mr Bebbington added: “We can use data from the Red Tractor health and performance review, combined with data from other areas such as the abattoir and post mortems, to form a full picture of what’s happening on the farm.

“It’s been great working with someone who is not afraid about looking at different ways of doing things.”

ENDS

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