

AAAP White Paper on Poultry Welfare and Careful Use of Antibiotics

The veterinary oath guides and affirms a veterinarian's use of "scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge." So, the main goals of poultry veterinary medicine are to address the health and welfare of poultry, while promoting responsible livestock production and protecting public health.

Antibiotic stewardship is very important to the veterinarians, food companies, regulators and other stakeholders who make decisions about sustainable livestock and food production. We encourage the poultry industry to continue to research and evaluate new technology and production systems that will eliminate routine use of antibiotics. Our goals are to develop and implement practices that decrease the need for the treatment of sick animals and use of therapeutic products if animals are sick, and increase the positive welfare outcomes for the animals under our care.

We support additional research to emphasize practical husbandry methods and to establish effective ways to measure the use of alternative products since the effectiveness, dosage and duration of many of these products have not been scientifically proven to provide treatment for diseases. We also recommend continued training and support for poultry production personnel to efficiently and effectively respond to concerns about flock mortality and illness that may precede a disease outbreak.

Even with all of these efforts, flocks may become sick and antibiotic treatment can be a necessary and ethical option for the poultry veterinarian to consider. To reduce animal suffering and death from treatable illnesses, there are circumstances where antibiotics serve as a critical component of flock care. Veterinarians need the ability to make the proper treatment plans for animal health and animal welfare, including the use of antibiotics when warranted as part of their professional commitment and ethical obligation.

Increasing consumer interest in where food comes from has highlighted concerns about how flocks are raised and what antibiotics are used in food producing animals. Two common misconceptions are:

- *on-farm use of antibiotics results in antibiotic resistant "superbugs"*
- *treatment of a farm animal results in antibiotic residues in food*

There is no evidence that antibiotic use in food animals has resulted in widespread cases of untreatable bacterial illnesses in people. Nonetheless, as poultry veterinarians, we must be leaders and take active responsibility in the careful use of antibiotics in animals raised for

human consumption. For each specific antibiotic used in food producing animals, federal law establishes a time of ‘no antibiotic use’ before slaughter or before eggs can be used for human consumption. (Chickens laying eggs for human consumption are never given antibiotics requiring a withdrawal.) During this time of no drug use, often referred to as withdrawal time, the animal’s body eliminates the drug (including antibiotics) from its system so that no drug residues are present at the time of slaughter. This means that poultry meat and eggs are free of antibiotics. The veterinarian responsible for the care of the animals is responsible for helping the farmer ensure that the withdrawal times are met. For additional oversight, the federal government performs testing to verify farmers are in compliance.ⁱ

There is a growing trend for some food retailers and restaurants to only offer poultry products from flocks raised with no antibiotics. This practice may result in situations where farmers are reluctant to allow treatment of flocks in order to maintain their ‘antibiotic free’ status. A veterinarian should be involved in the decision-making, keeping in mind there may not be an available or approved antibiotic treatment option for some diseases. Antibiotic treatment should be a viable option when appropriate and necessary for the health and well-being of the animal, even when marketing and consumer preference dictate otherwise.

The AAAP believes that judicious use of antibiotics is part of the ethical and moral responsibility of a poultry veterinarian to prevent suffering in poultry flocks that have a treatable illness. In addition, AAAP believes that antibiotic stewardshipⁱⁱ will require the veterinarian to:

- *Ask if there is a non-antibiotic alternative that will appropriately prevent, control, or treat the disease challenge,*
- *Choose a suitable antibiotic that has been demonstrated to be safe and effective for the purpose in which it will be used, if a non-antibiotic alternative is not available, and*
- *Assure that the antibiotic will be administered in a safe and effective manner.*

In summary, antibiotic use must be minimized through carefully planned and well-executed preventative practices. Antibiotic treatment remains an important tool for poultry veterinarians to protect the health and well-being of flocks and should not be sacrificed in the name of marketing of an antibiotic-free product. Veterinarians should use their scientific knowledge to carefully consider all treatment options to protect both animal and human health. Antibiotic stewardship and collaborative discussion among all stakeholders who make decisions about sustainable livestock and food production are critical for the future of the poultry industry.

ⁱ FSIS Residue Detection Program

ⁱⁱ Mike Apley, Kansas State Professor (NIAA Antibiotics Symposium)