

ANTIBIOTICS TO GROW FARM ANIMALS RAISE SUPERBUG RISK

Relevant for: Science & Technology | Topic: Biotechnology, Genetics & Health related developments

The world's biggest animal drugs company has been accused of double standards and of exposing consumers in India to "higher levels of risk" by selling antibiotics for purposes now banned in Europe and the U.S.

Zoetis, the largest producer of veterinary medicines, is supplying Indian farmers with antibiotics to help their animals grow faster. The practice should be banned worldwide, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), because it increases the prevalence of resistant bacteria that can infect humans and cause deadly and untreatable infections.

The company stopped advertising antibiotics as growth promoters to American farmers almost two years ago. Zoetis publicly supported new laws in the U.S. banning this abuse of antibiotics as part of its "continued commitment to antibiotic stewardship". However, Zoetis continues to sell antibiotics directly to Indian farmers with claims on the company's Indian website that they will make animals grow bigger and faster.

This is not currently against Indian law although the government has called for it to end and Maharashtra banned the indiscriminate use of antibiotics in agriculture after a *Hindu/Bureau of Investigative Journalism* report earlier this year.

Abdul Ghafur, a professor in infectious diseases who brought together medical societies and the Indian government in 2012 to create a plan to tackle antibiotic resistance, known as the Chennai Declaration, said Zoetis is adopting "double standards". "If an American company follows one policy in America, they should follow the same policy in India," he added.

Double standards

Thomas Van Boeckel, a researcher at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich) who has mapped antibiotic use in agriculture, said: "It is blatantly clear that Zoetis is using a double standard in the way it is willing to expose consumers in India to higher levels of risk than in the United States." Zoetis says it complies with the law in each location where it operates.

The unnecessary use of antibiotics in human medicine and agriculture, such as their use to make animals grow faster rather than treat disease, are major contributors to growing levels of resistant bacteria. It is estimated 1,00,000 babies a year in the country die from infections from resistant bugs. Worldwide they're believed to kill 7,00,000 people, according to a British government-commissioned review in 2016. WHO has called antibiotic resistance one of the greatest threats to public health.

Zoetis, a former subsidiary of pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, has previously said it is "a leader in providing ongoing education to veterinarians and livestock producers on the proper use of antimicrobial drugs". But the multibillion dollar U.S. company still sells its antibiotics to farmers in India.

WHO, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) have called for a worldwide ban on the use of antibiotics to fatten farm animals — a practice already banned in the EU and U.S. — in an attempt to stem the rising

threat of resistance.

Illegal sale

Zoetis said that when used “properly and responsibly according to their approved indications” and “under the supervision of a veterinary professional” its products do not contribute to drug resistance and do not pose a threat to public health.

But unnecessarily giving healthy animals antibiotics — such as their use to help fatten livestock — is fuelling the rise of superbugs, according to WHO. And, despite Zoetis’ stance they should be used under the supervision of a vet, they can be bought without a prescription in India.

In veterinary drug stores in Hyderabad, the Bureau found a number of antibiotics manufactured by Zoetis, which are used to fatten animals, being sold over the counter without a prescription. A Bureau reporter, posing as a veterinary drug store owner, also spoke to a member of Zoetis’ Indian sales team who said it typically sold these antibiotics directly to farmers.

Ahead of new laws introduced last year in the U.S. banning the use of antibiotics as growth promoters, Zoetis voluntarily began to remove such claims from its products there. In 2013, Zoetis said it “supports the FDA’s efforts to voluntarily phase out growth promotion indications for medically important antibiotics”. Meanwhile, in India Zoetis is selling Neftin-T, which contains the antibiotic tylosin. Zoetis recommends feeding Neftin-T to chickens to “improve weight gain and FCR [feed conversion rate]”.

Tylosin is not only critically important to animal health, it has been banned for use as a growth promoter in the EU since 1998 because of fears it fuels resistance to erythromycin, which is used to treat chest infections and other human diseases. WHO classes erythromycin as critically important to human health.

The practice of using antibiotics to make animals grow faster was banned completely in the EU in 2006.

Pharmaceutical companies earn about \$5 billion a year from worldwide sales of antibiotics for livestock, according to Animal Pharm. As one of the world’s leading producers of medicated feed additives — many of which contain antibiotics — Zoetis takes a significant slice of this.

Banned abroad

Zoetis faces a dwindling market in U.S. since the ban last year for these products but expects that increased sales elsewhere will more than compensate in the future. Speaking to investment analysts in February, Zoetis CFO Glenn David said, despite the downturn in the U.S., he still expects to see sales of medicated feed additives rise “as the emerging markets become more industrialised”.

Animals reared for meat in the major emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are expected to consume double the amount of antibiotics in 2030 than they did in 2010.

Responding to the Bureau’s findings, Zoetis said: “Each country enacts regulations appropriate for their market needs and standards, and we work with the national regulatory authorities in various countries, including India, to understand, respect and comply with local regulatory interpretation and oversight.”

Experts are particularly concerned about the widespread use of a 'last hope' antibiotic on Indian poultry farms. Colistin is often used to treat seriously ill people with infections that have become resistant to almost all other drugs and is deemed one of the "highest priority, critically important" antibiotics by WHO as it is so crucial to human medicine.

Although none of Zoetis' growth promoters contain colistin, a number of major Indian poultry companies have been found to use the drug, spreading fears about how much longer one of our last lines of defence against highly resistant infections will be effective.

Fears about growing resistance to a drug crucially important to human health has led some to call for an outright ban of colistin use on farms. The discovery of a colistin-resistant gene that can pass between bacteria, conferring resistance to bugs never exposed to the drug, sent shockwaves through the medical community in 2015. This transfer will likely accelerate the spread of resistance to colistin, further boosted by the rampant use of the antibiotic on farms in many countries.

Timothy Walsh, a professor at Cardiff University who made the discovery in 2015, called for a worldwide ban on colistin use in agriculture.

"I'll be OK, but my children and my children's children are seriously going to grow up in a world where we have no viable antibiotics because of unrivalled stupidity" he said.

But growth promoting antibiotics, including colistin, remain widely available to Indian farmers through a number of international and domestic pharmaceutical companies.

Mr. Walsh said: "I predict that colistin as a drug will be dead in 10 years time. And given what is in the pipeline, which is next to nothing, and given the plasticity of bacteria and their ability to evolve and adapt and survive and prosper, I see no good end to this story at all."

If an American company follows one policy in America, they should follow the same policy in India

Abdul Ghafur

Professor in Infectious Diseases

We work with the national regulatory authorities in various countries, including India

Zoetis

Sign up to receive our newsletter in your inbox every day!

Please enter a valid email address.

Our existing notification subscribers need to choose this option to keep getting the alerts.

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com