

The moral majority

Could taxation be the simplest and most ethical way to reduce antibiotic use in farming?

For many attending the 28 June 2017 European Parliament conference on the scientific, human health, husbandry, and socio-economic aspects of antibacterial resistance, the moments of heart-wrenching silence as Susan Fallon fought to maintain her composure said more about the growing threat of AMR than decades of ‘expert’ debate. Fallon’s moving keynote testimony on the tragic loss of her daughter to hospital-acquired MRSA ensured that the high-level event maintained a focus on the human and socio-economic consequences of the looming AMR crisis.

The ethical and moral aspects of AMR were the primary focus for another keynote speaker at the

to ensure that antibiotics will continue to be usable in the future. “Given the scale of the threat, the actions to be taken need to be firm, determined and expedient,” stressed Kuhn, who cautioned, “They will not be adequate as long as we do not understand or refuse to see that the mixtures of antibiotics and medicines, and medicines in livestock breeding are just a symptom of something of a much deeper concern.”

Expanding on this, he explained, “It is the idea that we own the earth and see it mainly as a commodity we can exploit. What we have lost is a sense of stewardship. We tend to look for technical solutions to a problem that requires nothing less than a change of mentality and the ability to broaden our vision.” Kuhn referred to the encyclical letter of Pope Francis, where the pontiff proclaimed, “Politics must regain its supremacy over economy.” Kuhn, who advises on ecology, sustainability, education, culture

and youth policy to COMECE, recognised that there is a need to feed ourselves, and that farmers must be able to make a living, but advocated the respectable treatment of what he called, ‘our co-creatures’. “The way animals are kept today in the livestock industry, a method that encourages the

pre-emptive use of antibiotics, necessary to avoid illnesses is, from the point of the Catholic Church-led teaching, simply unethical.” Therefore, he argued the “Food industry, our wholesale and, retail trade, and finally our behaviour as consumers” must be re-thought. He told attendees at the packed event, “If politics remains caught up in inconsequential discussions we will continue to avoid facing the major problems of humanity”.

His emphasis of the “natural laws” and moral imperatives relating to AMR was partly endorsed by Dr Hannah Maslen, deputy director, Uehiro Chair in Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford, who argued that “moral obligation and responsibility” ought to be incorporated into policymaking discussions. Maslen said, “It’s clear that AMR must be a moral as well as a practical issue”. She cited as evidence the findings of a 2016 review on antimicrobial resistance commissioned by the UK government which warns that by 2050, drug resistant infections will put 10 million lives a year and at least \$100 trillion worth of economic output at risk. “Such significant physical and economic harms,” she added, “are clearly morally important.” She went on, “The interests of those who will die or whose health will be otherwise substantially deteriorating as a result of AMR indisputably carries great moral weight. The question that we need to ask when considering action - or inaction - is which are morally relevant?” Health interests, Maslen noted, are “fundamental” and so “clearly constitute the weightiest consideration”. She argued that, “Without our health, we cannot protect any other interest and this interest is also held by the largest number of people. On the other hand, largescale farming operations that have commercially



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Michael Kuhn

event, Michael Kuhn, assistant secretary general of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community (COMECE). Highlighting that the main objective of the meeting was to reflect on how an “imminent catastrophe” could be averted, he called for immediate action to be taken

viable alternatives to meat production or to using methods involving antibiotics would not have their commercial viability threatened by such restrictions on antibiotics”.

The most ethical course of action, Maslen believes, would be to start imposing taxes, including a consumer tax, on meat products farmed using antibiotics.

As well as regulatory measures, another proposal she suggested would be to inform farmers and consumers about the need to



address antimicrobial resistance. "This will be crucial, both to justify these policies to them and to further reduce the production, and consumption of meat farmed using antibiotics." She added that "Banning antibiotics completely in farming tomorrow would put the interests of farmers and those dependent on their meat in jeopardy". Farmers' interests are "not morally negligible".

However, her "initiatives do not have to do all or nothing

straight away." Maslen acknowledged the role of non-antibiotic alternatives in assisting the transition away from antibiotics. She concluded by saying governments worldwide are under a moral obligation to regulate the use of antibiotics and farming. "Containing AMR is a matter of collective responsibility requiring the effort of a large portion of the population. It is

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Dr Hannah Maslen

the moral duty of political leaders to make sure that we collectively fulfil this responsibility."

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incentives to be relied upon to make their own contribution to this international issue so it is incumbent upon states to fulfil this obligation." ★