

# LEADERS DEBATE IMPACT OF DECOUPLING ON PROFESSION

DECOUPLING vets' right to prescribe from their right to dispense antibiotics would have little or no impact on reducing the threat of antimicrobial resistance.

That was the view of XLVets chief executive Andrew Curwen, speaking at a Veterinary Marketing Association (VMA) meeting in the House of Lords.

The VMA debate was entitled "Right to prescribe – right to dispense. All or nothing for vets?" and featured a panel of experts including Lord Sandy Trees, Jamie Crittall from Beech House Veterinary Centre, Paul Green from the VMD and AHDA general secretary Ian Scott.

According to the latest figures, there are 400 tons of active antibiotic ingredients sold into the UK veterinary market every year, which can be prescribed and sold by vets. However, there is pressure from some in Europe to remove the right of vets to sell a whole



raft of medicines, particularly antibiotics.

However, according to Mr Curwen, such a step would have little impact on the rise of resistance. "If we removed veterinary surgeons from the supply chain we would be decreasing the number of very highly qualified advising parties and with that we would have a net reduction in the level of information on the correct use of any of these medicines," he said.

"One of the points often raised is the conflict of interest. But conflicts of interest are something vets have to deal with all the time; it is what makes a professional person a professional.

"Veterinary professionals are not

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working in a business where, if they get it wrong, they will lose a customer; if they get it wrong they lose their livelihood.

"Let us not confuse the issue between dispensing and prescribing. If we want to talk about the amount of antimicrobials used, let's remember it is the prescribing behaviour that defines use. I can find no evidence in the human field that separating prescribing from dispensing does anything that impacts in prescribing behaviour."

## Animal welfare

There was concern that removing the right to prescribe from the right to dispense would impact on a profession

that has traditionally relied on profits from medicines. While there could be some benefits for those in companion animal practice, according to Jamie Crittall there could be negative knock-on effects for animal welfare.

"From my point of view, as a business owner, it will be all or nothing and will provide great opportunities to think out of the box and some practices will start to run their own in-house pharmacies and become dispensing veterinarians, just like the medical profession.

"However, I have to consider the animals and their owners. Once owners have their prescription, they will get their medicines from a pharmacy or

*continued overleaf*

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from the internet, it may or may not be cheaper, and I definitely think it will be more inconvenient and could delay crucial treatment.

"Therefore, this potential change is to the maximum detriment of the client in respect to customer service and regarding animal welfare. The idea of helping the consumer and avoiding continuing resistance may have completely backfired."

### Reassessment

The meeting also heard vets might need to reassess how and how much they charge for their services.

David Lonsdale from August Equity, a private equity firm that invests in health care, claimed charges for veterinary care should be more in line with those in human health.

"It is bizarre to me to see how much the veterinary profession discounts its own time and this drugs/fee mix, which is inherent in

the sector, is a very dangerous one," he said.

"I think the profession needs to look at itself a little bit and realise this is a valuable service that undervalues itself. That being the starting point and whichever way this goes, the profession as a whole would be in a much better place to withstand the shocks that may happen."

Prof Lord Trees added: "We undervalue our know-how and we are lousy at getting that message over. If we look at the individual spend for human medical care, the spend is about £2,000 for every man, woman and child whether they use it or not. If you look at some veterinary market surveys, the average spend for companion animals was about £238.

"That is an incredible difference and I think we as vets are offering a closely comparable service to that which humans enjoy in Britain and we are doing that at a 10 per cent cost of the total to humans and that is a message we really need to get out there."