

Fake News

Antimicrobial issues are as vulnerable to 'fake news' as any other subject; indeed, given the number of people and organisations who are looking to sway opinion and influence others, maybe more vulnerable. I found it disturbing when the Oxford Dictionary announced that 'post-truth' was word of the year in 2016, but in the age of social media and populism, not that surprised. The problem is that to navigate these days, the reader needs to employ critical thinking when considering information channels; a trait which most readers have little time for. As a society, we tend to read headlines in newspapers, for example, and not bother with the detail, which often adds proper perspective and sometimes corrects the very headline above.

When considering 'news' or 'information' on antibiotic use, we need to also consider the source or check the author, check the whole story and look for expert opinion in this field. Data should be checked to see if it is current and if it is global, EU or UK data. When certain countries within the EU are offered up as shining examples of what has been achieved, we should check the whole story. If something is being held up as too good to be true, such as 'antibiotic-free', it usually is, and the other implications of such a label need looking at.

We know, for example, that there is a problem with antibiotic use globally, both in humans and in animals. We also know that there is quite a difference between north and south in the EU and between east and west. As RUMA Chairman, I am interested in our position when discussing farm animals in the UK and I get very annoyed when I see individuals and organisations confusing all these figures, often quite deliberately, in order to make a point. It is also irritating seeing groups who purport to support high welfare, holding up another EU country as a shining example of reduced antibiotic use (when we know full well that the country in question employs methods of production which these same groups would fight against tooth and nail in the UK), when it has lower welfare standards which are deliberately ignored.

I make no apology for being forthright in my approach to this subject. We have been tough with farmers, vets and, on occasions, government at RUMA over the last year, as we set targets for the industry in each sector (which are very different) in order to reduce antibiotic use between now and 2020. We have achieved a reduction of 27% over the last two years, taking us under the government target of 50mg/kg two years early; a fantastic achievement. We are on the way to becoming one of the lowest users of antibiotics in farm animals in the EU, whilst having high animal welfare and (unlike many countries held up as examples) being one of the big food producers in Europe.

It saddens me that science is increasingly ignored as major retailers and others wilt under the pressure of well-organised, well-funded pressure groups, many

of whom are looking to end livestock farming. If we abandon science and evidence-based reports, we are on the slippery slope where ignorance, 'beliefs' and mission drive the agenda. There will be no reference to fall back on, no platform to build on, and we will lose our way. In this modern day, where everyone has an opinion and shouts it loudly to anyone who may be listening, science seems a tedious, slow deliverer of fact and opinion.

Emotion, bias, and lack of patience and understanding work together to form a powerful coalition which seeks to pedal fake news, whilst ignoring and indeed trampling over proper science. If they succeed, we are in real trouble as this is all aimed at antibiotic use on farm, particularly aimed at systems employed and size of farm, but of course livestock farming generally. Human medicine has been persuaded in some quarters that antibiotic resistance is caused largely by farm animals; a total misrepresentation of the facts and evidence, yet many (who should know better) choose to believe it.

We all need to get the message out to the human medicine experts that we are all in this together under the 'One Health' banner, and we need to continue to furnish them with the facts about what we do on farm. When engaged, they are not only genuinely interested, but amazed at what we do and what the real story is when compared to what they are told by pressure groups. It is vital we all stand together; understand what is happening, direction of travel and what the truth is.

Vaccines are one of the most important scientific breakthroughs of all time and yet we see 'anti-vax' sentiment drowning out experts and science; threatening human health around the globe. In the Global Risk Report published by World Economic Forum (WEF), it states that two of the greatest risks are massive digital misinformation coupled with the dangers of human hubris on health. Appetite for fake news is unlikely to diminish due to the propagation of distrust in experts, science and institutions. It is vital we stand firm.



Gwyn Jones

Gwyn Jones was born into a hill farming family in Snowdonia, North Wales. Gwyn trained as an engineer with Rolls Royce in Shropshire, and worked in London for a specialist engineering company before deciding to go back to agriculture, working on a large estate in North Wales whilst attending college (Llysfasi and Aberystwyth). Gwyn is now immersed in off farm activity as well as farming with his daughter Gwenan (past three years) at Boughton Dairy, Tillington, near Petworth, West Sussex.

Email: wealdclay@btinternet.com