THE GLOBAL FIGHT AGAINST ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE IN ANIMALS

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15707032

ABSTRACT

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a growing global crisis that poses a significant threat to both human and animal health. It occurs when bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites evolve to resist the drugs designed to kill or control them. AMR is of particular concern in veterinary medicine, as animals – whether pets, livestock, or wildlife – are often treated with antibiotics and other antimicrobials to prevent and treat infections. However, inappropriate use of these drugs can lead to the development of resistant strains, which can spread to humans, other animals, and the environment, creating a vicious cycle of resistance that is difficult to combat. This article explores the global fight against antimicrobial resistance in animals, examining the causes, impact, and current strategies being implemented to mitigate this growing crisis.

KEYWORDS: AMR, veterinary medicine, antibiotics in animals, One Health, resistant bacteria, livestock farming, antibiotic misuse

INTRODUCTION

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) refers to the ability of microorganisms, including bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites, to resist the effects of drugs that once killed or inhibited their growth. In the case of bacterial resistance, this means that the bacteria no longer respond to antibiotics that were previously effective in treating infections.

AMR develops naturally over time as microorganisms evolve to survive in the presence of antimicrobial agents. However, human and veterinary overuse and misuse of these drugs accelerate the process. In veterinary medicine, antibiotics are frequently used not only to treat infections but also to promote growth in livestock and to prevent disease in healthy animals. This widespread use contributes to the emergence of drug-resistant bacteria that can affect both animals and humans.

THE ROLE OF VETERINARIANS IN AMR

Veterinarians play a crucial role in addressing the AMR crisis. As frontline caregivers for animals, they are directly involved in prescribing and administering antimicrobials to pets, livestock, and wildlife. However, improper use of these drugs – whether through over-prescription, underuse, or incorrect administration – contributes significantly to the development of antimicrobial resistance.

Key issues that veterinarians must navigate when addressing AMR include:

1. Over-prescribing antibiotics: In some cases, veterinarians may prescribe antibiotics for conditions that do not require them, such as viral infections. Over-prescription increases the likelihood that resistant strains will develop.
2. Use of antibiotics for growth promotion: In the agricultural sector, antibiotics are often used to promote faster growth in healthy animals. This practice can lead to the development of resistant bacteria that can then spread to humans through food consumption.

3. Lack of diagnostics: In some regions, there is insufficient access to diagnostic tools, leading to the widespread use of antibiotics without knowing the underlying cause of the infection. This can result in unnecessary antibiotic use, which accelerates resistance.
4. Inadequate adherence to guidelines: Many countries have established guidelines for the responsible use of antimicrobials in veterinary medicine. However, inconsistent enforcement and lack of education on these guidelines can undermine their effectiveness.

Veterinarians are at the forefront of combatting AMR by promoting responsible antimicrobial use, educating pet owners and livestock farmers, and helping to implement stewardship programs that prioritize the health of both animals and humans.

CAUSES OF AMR IN ANIMALS

AMR in animals is driven by several key factors, many of which are related to the misuse and overuse of antimicrobials:

1. **Overuse of Antibiotics in Livestock Farming**: The widespread use of antibiotics in food-producing animals – especially for growth promotion, disease prevention, and treatment of subclinical infections – has been identified as one of the leading causes of AMR. In intensive farming systems, animals are often kept in crowded conditions that increase the likelihood of disease transmission. In these settings, antibiotics are used proactively, often without clear medical justification, leading to the development of resistant bacteria.

2**. Inappropriate Prescription Practices in Veterinary Clinics**: Just as in human medicine, veterinarians may sometimes prescribe antibiotics unnecessarily. For instance, prescribing antibiotics for viral infections (such as colds or flu) or when the condition could resolve without antimicrobial treatment increases the risk of resistance. Similarly, failure to complete a full course of antibiotics as prescribed can lead to incomplete eradication of bacteria and the development of resistance.

3. **Use of Antimicrobials in Pets**: While less common than in livestock, pets, particularly cats and dogs, are frequently prescribed antibiotics. Inappropriate prescribing, incorrect dosages, or unnecessary use of antibiotics in companion animals can also contribute to AMR. Pet owners may request antibiotics for their animals, sometimes without fully understanding when they are needed, or they may not follow the prescribed course of treatment.

4. **Lack of Regulation and Enforcement**: In some countries, weak regulatory frameworks or inadequate enforcement of existing regulations lead to the unregulated use of antimicrobials. Farmers, veterinarians, and even pet owners may have easier access to antibiotics without proper oversight, leading to misuse.

CONSEQUENCES OF AMR IN ANIMALS

The consequences of antimicrobial resistance in animals extend beyond just the animals themselves. Resistant infections can have serious implications for human health, the economy, and the environment.

1. **Human Health Risks**

Resistant bacteria in animals can be transmitted to humans through direct contact, contaminated food, or environmental exposure. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified the transfer of resistant bacteria from animals to humans as a major public health concern. For example, the use of antibiotics in livestock can lead to the emergence of resistant strains of bacteria, such as Salmonella or E. coli, which can cause severe human infections.

2. **Impact on Veterinary Care**

Infections caused by resistant bacteria in animals can be difficult, or even impossible, to treat, leading to increased animal suffering, longer treatment times, and higher costs for animal care. In some cases, infections may become untreatable, leading to the loss of valuable animals, particularly in agriculture, where animals are seen as assets.

3. **Economic Consequences**

The widespread use of antibiotics in agriculture helps to ensure the health and productivity of livestock. However, the emergence of resistant bacteria can compromise the effectiveness of these treatments, leading to increased mortality rates and a reduction in productivity. Additionally, the costs of treating resistant infections are often higher due to the need for more expensive drugs and longer hospital stays.

4. **Environmental Impact**

Antibiotics can enter the environment through animal waste, which can contaminate soil, water, and food supplies. Resistant bacteria can thrive in these environments, further exacerbating the spread of resistance.

GLOBAL EFFORTS TO COMBAT AMR IN ANIMALS

Efforts to combat antimicrobial resistance in animals are taking place at local, national, and international levels. Governments, veterinarians, public health organizations, and the agricultural industry are working together to address the root causes of AMR and implement effective control measures.

1. **World Health Organization (WHO) Guidelines**

The WHO has developed guidelines for the responsible use of antimicrobials in animals, emphasizing the need for a "One Health" approach. This approach recognizes the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health, and calls for coordinated action across all sectors. The WHO encourages the reduction of antibiotic use in food animals, especially those that are critically important to human health, such as antibiotics used to treat human infections.

2. **The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Organization for Animal Health (OIE)**

The FAO and OIE have developed international standards and frameworks for managing AMR in animals. They work with governments to implement surveillance systems, promote good farming practices, and ensure that antibiotics are used responsibly in animal agriculture.

3. **National Regulations and Stewardship Programs**

Many countries have introduced national regulations aimed at reducing the overuse of antibiotics in animals. These regulations often include restrictions on the use of antibiotics for growth promotion, the establishment of veterinary antimicrobial stewardship programs, and enhanced surveillance of antimicrobial use and resistance patterns.

4. **Antimicrobial Stewardship in Veterinary Practices**

In veterinary clinics, antimicrobial stewardship programs are being developed to ensure that antibiotics are only used when necessary and are prescribed in the correct doses and durations. These programs also emphasize the importance of diagnostics, ensuring that veterinarians can accurately determine whether an infection is bacterial and whether antibiotics are required.

5. **Public Awareness and Education**

Increasing awareness among the public, veterinarians, and farmers about the dangers of AMR is a critical step in curbing its spread. Educational campaigns are encouraging responsible antibiotic use, promoting hygiene practices in farming, and emphasizing the importance of following prescribed treatment courses.

CONCLUSION

Antimicrobial resistance is a serious threat that requires coordinated action across all sectors, including human and veterinary medicine, agriculture, and environmental health. Veterinarians play a pivotal role in mitigating the rise of AMR by promoting responsible use of antibiotics, educating animal owners and farmers, and adhering to stewardship guidelines. However, addressing AMR will require a global commitment to reducing antibiotic misuse, improving surveillance, and supporting alternative treatments.

The fight against antimicrobial resistance in animals is not only about preserving the effectiveness of antibiotics but also about ensuring the health and well-being of animals, humans, and the environment for future generations. By working together, we can mitigate the dangers of AMR and preserve the future of medicine in both veterinary and human care.

Cite this article:
Poonam Shakya, Akshay Garg, R P Singh, Shilpa Gajbhiye, Vaishali Khare. (2025). The global fight against antimicrobial resistance in animals. Vet Farm Frontier, 02(05), 92–94.
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15707032