



Consumer perceptions of OneHealth

Accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, awareness of AMR and OneHealth is increasing among consumers and there are early signs that consumer behaviours may also be changing. Research in the DAFM SWAB project is exploring what this means for the agri-food sector.

Background

Covid-19 is the latest of many examples emphasising the interconnectedness of human and animal health. In November 2020, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)/World Health Organisation (WHO)/World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) Tripartite Collaboration on AMR organised World Antimicrobial Awareness Week under the slogan 'Handle with Care'.

The aim was to increase awareness of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) – a OneHealth emergency that is exacerbated by the overuse and misuse of antimicrobials (including antibiotics) in both human and animal health practices. The farming sector is taking action to reduce the use of antibiotics (iNAP; Department of Health/Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2017). However, engaging with the public on this issue involves communicating a complex message: agriculture needs to reduce its use of antimicrobials, but to eliminate them completely could lead to unintended impacts on farm animal welfare.

Communication of this message is made difficult by "antibiotic-free" labelling initiatives and suspected low awareness among consumers about the purpose and use of antibiotics in farming. In Ireland specifically, there has been limited research exploring what consumers know about antibiotic use in farming, whether they are concerned by these practices, and whether they link agricultural antibiotic use to OneHealth and AMR.

Consumer research

During October/November 2019, eight focus groups were carried out on the island of Ireland with key informant groups (n = 36): urban seniors; rural seniors; young urban females; young rural males; low socio-economic status (SES) urban parents; rural parents; urban vegetarians; and, rural 'foodies'. The focus groups were followed up in September 2020 with a large-scale representative survey of consumers (n = 972) on the island of Ireland. The first findings from this research indicate the extent of consumer knowledge of antibiotic use in farming, and the level of their awareness of AMR and OneHealth.

Low public knowledge of antibiotic use in farming

Some 62 % of survey respondents felt that they did not have enough information on the use of antibiotics in agriculture. Focus group insights identify the nature of these knowledge gaps in areas including antibiotic use farm practices, regulation of the sector, and impacts on human health (**Figure 1**). Within the focus groups, awareness of the link between antibiotic use on farms and AMR was relatively low.

Increased awareness of AMR and OneHealth due to Covid-19

The focus groups indicated relatively high awareness of AMR as a public health threat; this was mirrored in the survey, with 71 % of respondents indicating that they were aware of AMR as an issue. The survey



FIGURE 1: Example questions asked by consumers about the use of antibiotics in farming.

revealed that almost half of the participants (47 %) believed that Covid-19 had made them more aware of AMR, and of particular interest, 43 % indicated that Covid-19 had also made them more aware of the connection between animal health management and human health. For one in three (34 %), this awareness translated into behaviour change in the form of increased use of animal welfare food labels (Figure 2).

Implications for the agri-food sector

Covid-19 has been a catalyst for awareness raising and behaviour change in many different areas of life – this effect has extended to changing consumers' perceptions of AMR and OneHealth. We also see early evidence of an impact on some consumers' behaviour in the form of increased use of animal welfare food labelling. Despite increased awareness, the findings suggest that a sizable proportion of consumers are likely to have low baseline knowledge levels around the purpose and use of antibiotics in agriculture. In this environment, communicating with these consumers solely in a top-down manner (for example, through the use of labels and logos) is likely to be ineffective, and potentially could have unintended negative impacts.

A proactive approach is needed to communicate to consumers the commitments and actions that are required and undertaken by farmers to reduce antibiotic use. This includes significant actions taken to improve animal husbandry and undertake disease prevention measures, and continued responsible use of antibiotics where needed. Such complex messages cannot be communicated solely through labels. Greater engagement with the public by a range of actors (including farmers, veterinary bodies and scientists) is also required, meeting consumers on the channels and platforms they currently use to receive information on farm animal welfare, as well as creating new opportunities for engagement and public participation. Understanding consumer perceptions, and how they are formed, is a required first step in developing future initiatives seeking to engage and communicate with consumers on the topic of antibiotic use in agriculture.

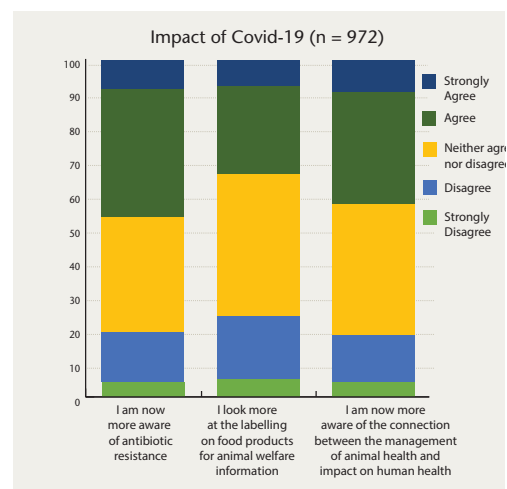


FIGURE 2. Impact of Covid-19 on consumers' awareness and behaviour.

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