

AMR improvements in NI through the control of endemic diseases

World Anti-Microbial Resistance (AMR) Awareness Week provides an opportunity to reflect on the AMR improvements that have been gained to date in NI through the control of endemic diseases of livestock and to consider the future advances that could be made.

The development of resistance occurs in line with increasing use of antimicrobials, so it is obvious that reducing the need for antimicrobials is foundational in driving down the global threat of AMR. One key way in which this can be achieved is by lowering the burden of animal infection, through preventing and controlling animal diseases, and also through reducing the exposure of livestock to infectious disease agents.

Much antibiotic use on farms is driven by a small number of endemic diseases that could be eradicated, such as BVD and IBR, or syndromes that can be very well controlled, such as lameness or mastitis. Steps to raise the health status of herds and flocks can be significantly assisted through the provision of control programmes that have wide industry support and through animal health planning.

Eleven years ago, the NI agri-food industry set up a not-for-profit company, Animal Health and Welfare NI (AHWNI), for the purposes of assisting with the delivery of animal health programmes for the NI cattle industry. One example of a collaborative initiative fostered by AHWNI has been the BVD Eradication Programme, which as a result of farmer and stakeholder commitment has seen herd levels of BVD decrease by over 74% since the end of the first year of the compulsory programme. This is a remarkable outcome considering the limited resources available and has driven down the need for antimicrobial treatments for pneumonias and gastro-intestinal infections that have occurred as a result of the presence of the BVD virus on affected farms.

There are many strategies that can be explored with a farm's vet to prevent and control disease to minimise the need for antibiotics: a biosecurity plan to keep new diseases out of the farm; good colostrum management and vaccination programmes (where appropriate); and reducing the sources of infection through good hygiene practices. Approaches that control one aspect of an infection can be beneficial for controlling other conditions.

Tangible government support of further programmes to control endemic diseases could help to reduce the AMR threat in NI further and also help to mitigate farm associated greenhouse gas emissions. There is a major 'public good' driver for controlling endemic diseases of livestock and now is the time for stakeholders and government to work to this end, through properly resourced, industry-led endemic disease control programmes.