



How do the changes to the Veterinary Medicine Regulations affect sheep vets?

In light of the changes to the Veterinary Medicine Regulations (VMR) which came into force on 17 May 2024, the Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS) and the Sheep Antibiotic Guardian Group (SAGG) have issued this fact sheet with the aim of reminding professionals of best practice when prescribing antibiotics in the sheep sector.

The largest proportion of antibiotics in the UK sheep sector are used for lameness. In some flocks there is also ongoing routine use of antibiotics for neonatal lambs or the control of enzootic abortion of ewes. Whilst antibiotic use may be justified as a preventative measure in some situations, it is important that this use is never routine and is always responsible, following appropriate guidelines. Where these are not followed there is increased likelihood of emergence and spread of antimicrobial resistance within the sheep sector and a risk of breaching the Veterinary Medicines Regulations (VMR).

What was previously accepted as guidance, is now legally required in the VMR and includes the following:

- Antibiotics must not be used routinely, where no attempts have been made to reduce the need for antibiotics (e.g. through management changes or vaccination)
- Antibiotics must not be used to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate farm management practices or poor husbandry.

The VMD guidance states that “Routine use refers to repeated, habitual use, such as treating every batch of animals without attempts to reduce the ongoing need to use antibiotics, and/or without a proper evidence/ risk-based assessment to determine whether antibiotic use is necessary.”

There is also a new AMR element within the VMR, specifically relating to **any prophylactic use** of antibiotics: Veterinary surgeons may only prescribe antibiotics for prophylactic treatment in exceptional circumstances where:

- the risk of an infection or infectious disease is very high
- the consequences of not prescribing the product is likely to be severe.

For guidance on how to assess the risk of infection and the severity of disease see the [VMD's Guidance on AMR elements of the VMRs, as amended](#).

When a veterinary surgeon does prescribe prophylactic antibiotics **to a group of animals**

- The rationale behind issuing the prescription for the group of animals must be clearly recorded by the veterinary surgeon prescribing it
- A management review must be carried out by the veterinary surgeon to identify risk factors and implement measures with the purpose of eliminating the need to treat prophylactically in the future.

A management review should involve the vet, farmer and farm staff, as a minimum. This should include a review of flock management, identifying any potential issues and how these can be resolved. Measures could include improved hygiene, biosecurity, husbandry, nutrition and/or vaccination, all with the purpose of preventing the need for future prophylactic antibiotic use. A record of the management review should be retained by the vet and the farmer.

Common scenarios that vets may encounter prophylactic antibiotic use in sheep flocks could include

- Use of oral or injectable antibiotics in neonatal lambs for the control of colibacillosis, watery mouth or joint ill.
- Use of injectable oxytetracycline for the control of enzootic abortion of ewes.
- Use of oxytetracyclines or macrolides to control lameness in groups of sheep, particularly store lambs.

Additionally, SVS and SAGG would like to make practitioners aware of the following points with relevance to the sheep industry

- Antibiotic footbaths continue to have no evidence to support efficacy and there are environmental concerns regarding disposal, so these are not considered appropriate
- All topically applied antibiotics should be considered in the same way as oral or injectable antibiotics when deciding on appropriate use. As such, for wound protection or navels and ear tag preventative treatments it is not appropriate to use an antibiotic spray when there are appropriate alternative disinfectants available, backed by appropriate evidence of efficacy.

For more guidance see:

[Antimicrobial Resistance clarification of new elements applied from the VMR - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/antimicrobial-resistance-clarification-of-new-elements-applied-from-the-vmr)

Written by Georgina Rigby, Kim Hamer & Fiona Lovatt, November 2024

Editors Notes

- The **Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS)** promotes sheep health and welfare through scientific meetings, workshops and training sessions and representation on the

British Veterinary Association Council and specialist Committees. The Society was formed in 1967 and the Society's five hundred members are drawn from all sectors of the sheep industry. Most members are veterinary surgeons but a quarter of the membership are advisers, researchers, farmers and shepherds.

Biosecurity and Disease management are the essential drivers for economic sheep farming, and this remains at the forefront of the Sheep Veterinary Society's agenda and we will continue to move this forward with the conversations between local veterinary surgeons and their sheep farmer clients being our principal focus.

- The **Sheep Antibiotic Guardian Group (SAGG)** is a voluntary group of cross sector organisations. It is responsible for co-ordinating the activity around antibiotic use in the sheep sector and to report progress on the antibiotic reduction targets on behalf of the sheep industry to the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture (RUMA) Alliance. Outputs of this group are available on the RUMA website: www.ruma.org.uk

SAGG is chaired by Fiona Lovatt who reports on behalf of the group into the RUMA Targets Task Force. The group secretariat is provided by the Veterinary Medicine Directorate (VMD) and membership includes: National Sheep Association (NSA), Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS), National Farmers Union (NFU), Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), Quality Meat Scotland (QMS), Hybu Cig Cymru – Meat Promotion Wales (HCC), Red Tractor, Farm Assured Welsh Livestock and Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance (RUMA).

For further information contact:

Kim Hamer, President, Sheep Veterinary Society - secretariat@sheepvetsoc.org.uk

Fiona Lovatt, Chair, Sheep Antibiotic Guardian Group - fiona@flockhealth.co.uk