Procurement criteria | Responsible antimicrobial use in products of animal origin

What can the healthcare sector do to tackle AMR in food production?

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a serious health threat and a growing challenge for healthcare systems. The European food production sector contributes to this global health and development threat. Overuse and misuse of antibiotics in farming is associated with a growing number of resistant bacteria that can spread to humans and therefore requires a holistic approach that includes targeting food production.

The scale of food provided in the healthcare sector makes it a well-positioned actor to drive sustainability in the food supply chain. Healthcare patients, visitors, and staff consume a large number of meals every day in European healthcare institutions. In 2011, the provision of main meals in UK healthcare facilities was over 130 million. In Paris alone, 18 facilities belonging to the Assistance publique-Hôpitaux de Paris (AP-HP) provide 62,000 meals a day.

In collaboration with our Healthcare Market Transformation Network, comprising health procurers, healthcare professionals, and other experts from across Europe, Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) Europe is developing procurement criteria to support sustainability goals in healthcare. The criteria below will help healthcare procurers to incentivise food producers to ensure responsible antimicrobial consumption.

This first edition of criteria is an easy-to-use toolbox that can be adapted to the particular needs of individual healthcare institutions. This set of criteria will need to be further developed over time as our knowledge as well as the availability of data, the use of antimicrobials, and other contextual factors evolve over time.

These criteria do not only address actions to rationalise the use of antimicrobials in food production, but also highlight several potential improvements in animal

welfare practices that can promote responsible use of antimicrobials in food-producing farms.

The health threat of AMR

An estimated 1.27 million deaths per year are directly attributable to antimicrobial resistance (AMR) globally - more than HIV/AIDS, breast cancer, or malaria. In Europe alone, AMR annually causes 33,000 deaths and costs the EU €1.5 billion in healthcare costs and productivity losses. Unless further action is taken, the global AMR death toll could be more than 10 times higher by 2050, more than the expected number of deaths from cancer and diabetes combined.

The European food production sector contributes to this global health and development threat. In 2020, over 5,500 tones of active antimicrobial substances were sold for animal consumption in Europe. This number is projected to increase by 6.7% between 2017 - 2030.

There is evidence that responsible use of antimicrobials in farm animals can decrease the prevalence of antibiotic and multi-drug resistant bacteria in animals. In the EU, new legislation on veterinary medicine, which entered into force on 28 January 2022, introduced new measures to ensure responsible antimicrobial use in animals. However, its provisions, which include a ban on the routine use of antimicrobials, might not have sufficient reach. Firstly, there are concerns that the food production sector hasn't made the necessary changes to comply with the legislation. Secondly, the regulation only partly applies to third-country operators exporting to the EU.

The European Commission's voluntary Green Public Procurement (GPP) instrument acknowledges that public authorities can leverage their purchasing power to favour goods and services with lower impacts on the environment, therefore making an important contribution to sustainable consumption and production.

In this context, procurers can play a key role in encouraging the adaptation of food supply chains to a model that ensures responsible use of antimicrobials.

Tendering criteria for food produced with responsible antimicrobial use

These criteria must apply to all animals across the entire farm to avoid double standards.

	Rationalise the use of antimicrobials
1	Antimicrobials are not used for growth promotion.
2	Antimicrobials are only administered according to the prescription of a veterinarian.
3	The producer keeps records of antimicrobial use, including those administered via feed and water. This information is available to the contractor upon request.
4	The producer does not use the antimicrobial colistin[1] on the farm.
5	Group treatment of species that can be treated individually is not standard practice on the farm.
6	All the highest-priority critically important antimicrobials (as defined by the WHO)[2] are only used in individual treatment when no other treatments are effective.
7	The farm has a protocol and the facilities to isolate infected animals for individual treatment if. The protocol is available to the purchaser on request.
8	The farm has reception stables where animals coming from other herds can be quarantined and tested for disease before joining the new herd.
9	Restrictions are put in place to ensure that only animals requiring treatment access to medicated feed and water.

[1] Colistin has been separated because its use in European food production is almost exclusively in forms suitable for group treatment.

[2] Cephalosporins (3rd, 4th, and 5th generation), Quinolones, Glycopeptides, Macrolides, and ketolides. Polymyxins (colistin) are covered in criterion 4.

	Reduce poor animal welfare practices that lead to an increased need for antimicrobial use
10	Farmed animals are not kept in cages or tethered.
11	Indoor farmed animals live in a space that allows them to move freely.[3]
12	Animals are kept in clean and ventilated spaces. Natural or mechanical ventilation systems must continuously provide clean air to indoor farmed animals.
13	Indoor farmed animals have constant access to the outdoors. If not, stables must have open or transparent areas through which daylight can enter.
14	Animals have not been subject to any kind of mutilation, e.g. tail docking in piglets, debeaking in hens.[4]
15	The producer regularly monitors and records safety and hygiene parameters of feeds and drinking water.[5] [6] These records can be provided to the purchaser upon request.
16	On-farm personnel are trained in good handling of the animals.

[3] Existing EU guidelines on organic farming address this issue. Individual countries might have more restrictive targets in place, we therefore recommend space allowances above minimum legal standards.

[4] Castration is permitted only if the animal has been previously anaesthetised.

[5] Animals have access to quality, nutritionally balanced feed and adequate formulation.

[6] Animals are bred to have balanced genetic traits that prioritise health, fitness and welfare over commercial traits, such as rapid growth and high yield.

Procurement advice to successfully implement these criteria

The recommendations below aim to ensure that implementing these criteria does not create unintended consequences.

Do not create double standards

The criteria should be applied to the farm as a whole. Using these criteria on a lot by lot basis could create double standards within the same farm. As these criteria aim at having an impact on the supply chain, we recommend that purchasers ask about practices of the whole farm - even when they are only purchasing a limited range of products from the farm.

Give producers time to adapt their production

An overly ambitious approach could result in suppliers giving up on responding to the tender. It takes time to adapt the production of a farm to new standards. The tendering institution should have a supportive and flexible role in educating and guiding producers through a systemic change process. It is up to each institution to define how long this process should take.

Review your existing criteria for food of animal origin before including these criteria

Some of the above criteria might overlap with other procurement criteria or rules already in place within your institution. Please review internal procurement policies already in place at your institution carefully to avoid any conflict with current tendering guidelines.