

## A vet's perspectives

### An interview with Dr Matthias Link, a vet and animal health consultant for organic farming based in Varrel (Germany)



Photograph: private

*Dr Link, is there any difference between organic and conventional farming as regards the use of antibiotics?*

**Link:** Yes, organic farming sets out to keep animals in such good health that no antibiotics are required. This is achieved through

the way they are bred, kept, fed, and generally treated. Also, organic farmers tend to wait that bit longer after medicines have been administered. There are statutory rules regarding how many courses of treatment an animal may receive in its lifetime. Organic farmers do not use any reserve antibiotics from human medicine either.

*Would it make sense to introduce different classes of antibiotics, with some to be used in human medicine and others in veterinary medicine?*

**Link:** No, because the active agents are the same in many instances. You also get cases of cross-resistance, whereby resistance to one active agent might imply resistance to a totally different agent as well.

*What can farmers do to reduce the likelihood of infection?*

**Link:** The day-to-day farming routine offers plenty of opportunities: high-quality feed for animals, improvements in stall hygiene and the general stall environment, dry bedding, regular cleaning of stalls and changes of bedding, reductions in density levels, keeping different age groups separate, vaccination programmes against specific pathogens, additional feed to ward off problems when the likelihood of infection is high, immediate treatment and segregation of sick animals, and intensive diagnostic measures to identify prevalent pathogens.

*Would it make sense to switch to older breeds? Are these less prone to disease?*

**Link:** I would not recommend this approach across the board. Diversity would actually be very helpful from a breeding perspective. It is risky to focus solely on 'performance' and on reducing the number of paternal lines. More importance should be attached to other breeding criteria such as longevity, hoof and udder health, etc. Old breeds may offer favourable characteristics in this regard.

*What role does the price of meat or milk play?*

**Link:** A very important one! If farmers are getting 3 to 7 cents for every litre of milk they sell, there is nothing left for investment in animal health. It's quite a different story in actual fact, and farming businesses are having to look at all their costs to see if any savings can be made. Quick savings can be made by cutting back on preventive health measures. But to be honest, it's not as though money is always ploughed straight into animal health when milk prices are high either. Things being they as they are, there is an onus on the legislative authority to see that existing animal welfare requirements are enforced.

*What role does the international livestock trade play?*

**Link:** The spread of the classical livestock diseases we have been very successful in eradicating within Western Europe is becoming a problem. This means foot and mouth disease, classical swine fever, African swine fever, and bluetongue are posing a new threat to us once more. Other infections also spread as a result of livestock transport, and the stress of transport often leads to outbreaks of disease which then affect otherwise healthy holdings. This is why the practice of administering long-term antibiotics on a preventive basis to new groupings of transported animals is so popular within the conventional livestock farming community. The alternative is simple: we need to have regional structures and to restrict the international trade in animals to embryos, sperm, or breeding animals on a case-by-case basis. The export of

animals for slaughter should be avoidable if regional structures are used, with meat being exported thereafter.

*What about large-scale slaughterhouses?*

**Link:** Large-scale production structures increase the risk of consumers being given infected food. Not only Salmonella or Campylobacter species, but also harmless microbes are carried from animal to animal during the slaughter process, including any forms of resistance. In a nutshell, these microbes then end up in consumers' kitchens, from where they colonise people's healthy flora and are carried in turn into hospital by these same people. Once there, these resistant pathogens tend to affect chronically ill patients or those with weakened immune systems and result in the dreaded untreatable infections.

*How do you rate the chances of things changing within farming?*

**Link:** Politically speaking, it is certainly very difficult to reduce production volumes, and this will inevitably involve some negative effects and a degree of unfairness, with some seeking to secure an advantage under false pretences. Also, this is really just the effect rather than the cause of what we actually want to improve: namely the unsatisfactory situation as regards animal welfare and health. For decades it's all been about increasing volume and reducing costs, and the success of this approach has resulted in surpluses and price erosion at the expense of animals, whose welfare has been neglected. For me, the work we do to resolve this issue will only bear fruit if we define our objectives: improve animal welfare, leave tails, beaks, and testicles alone, minimise disease levels, minimise the use of antibiotics, avoid losses, prevent excess fertilisation with slurry, limit the emissions associated with livestock farming, no genetically modified feed, etc. This would make for tougher production conditions as it would no longer be possible to produce volume on the previous scale and cost efficiency considerations would have to reflect the objectives too. We really need to define a legal framework for these objectives and introduce monitoring mechanisms at the



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same time. The antibiotics database is a good start, although it will take time before the data is reliable.

*What do you think about having labels for meat and fish products which contain antibiotics?*

**Link:** The concept of consumer decision-making has been overstated since the onset of the organic movement some decades ago. I think it has already become difficult to make sense of the wide range of certification you see on the shelves. Anyone without a particular understanding of the issues is now barely able to compare the contents of different brands. If I had to suggest anything, I believe a traffic light system might work, whereby red equals animals kept in stalls, amber equals free range, and green equals organic. This has proved very successful in terms of labelling for eggs, with everyone able to understand what is meant.

There are a couple of other problems, however. More and more food types are being sold in a highly processed state, which makes it difficult to provide information about individual ingredients. And consumers can only make decisions if they actually have a choice, which isn't always the case on our supermarket shelves. If you have to drive another five kilometres just to buy an organic product, it's no longer really a straight choice.

I'd reject the idea of a certificate for antibiotic-free products. Livestock are always going to suffer from disease and injury, even in the healthiest environment. Antibiotics are our most important medicine when it comes to dealing with infections. Anyone marketing products that do not contain antibiotics is either failing to treat these unavoidable diseases, disposing of this material via the market for conventional products, or simply lying.