

Feature

Can we live without drugs?



Alan Beynon BVM&S MRCVS of St David's Game Bird Services tells us about some alternatives to antibiotics.

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY PRESSURES PLACED on the game rearing and gamekeeping industry since the removal of Emtryl. We relied on this product for many of my early years and when it was made unavailable, we spent many weeks and months scratching our heads and wondering how we could carry on.

Since then, we have found that most game farmers and game rearers have improved their management and invested in new systems. There have been advances in rearing houses and improved laying systems. All of this has led to increased efficiencies and, with favourable weather over the last few years, we have seen a marked reduction in the incidence of disease in the Practice.

To some extent, the removal of Emtryl led initially to an increase in the use of

antibiotics to control disease such as Hexamita, used either to treat the disease itself or regimes to place the medicine in feed to prevent the problem.

Within the agricultural side of food production in the UK, there is considerable interest in the use of antibiotics, either to treat or prevent disease. There is an alarming increase in levels of antibiotic resistance in humans and

Use of antibiotics kills off many protective bacteria

there is much debate as to the cause of this and to what we can do to solve the problem. While the medics are examining levels of resistance and investigating what measures can be used to reduce

prescribing antibiotics for minor ailments, we vets are investigating the minimum amounts of medicines that can be used to treat infections.

In general it is very important for us all to understand that we must use the correct dose rate to treat a disease with a choice of antibiotic that is most suitable.

There is much research within the Practice into investigating what other products we can use to treat problems in gamebirds, but also to prevent the disease process in the first place. We feel we have reached a place among the majority of our clients

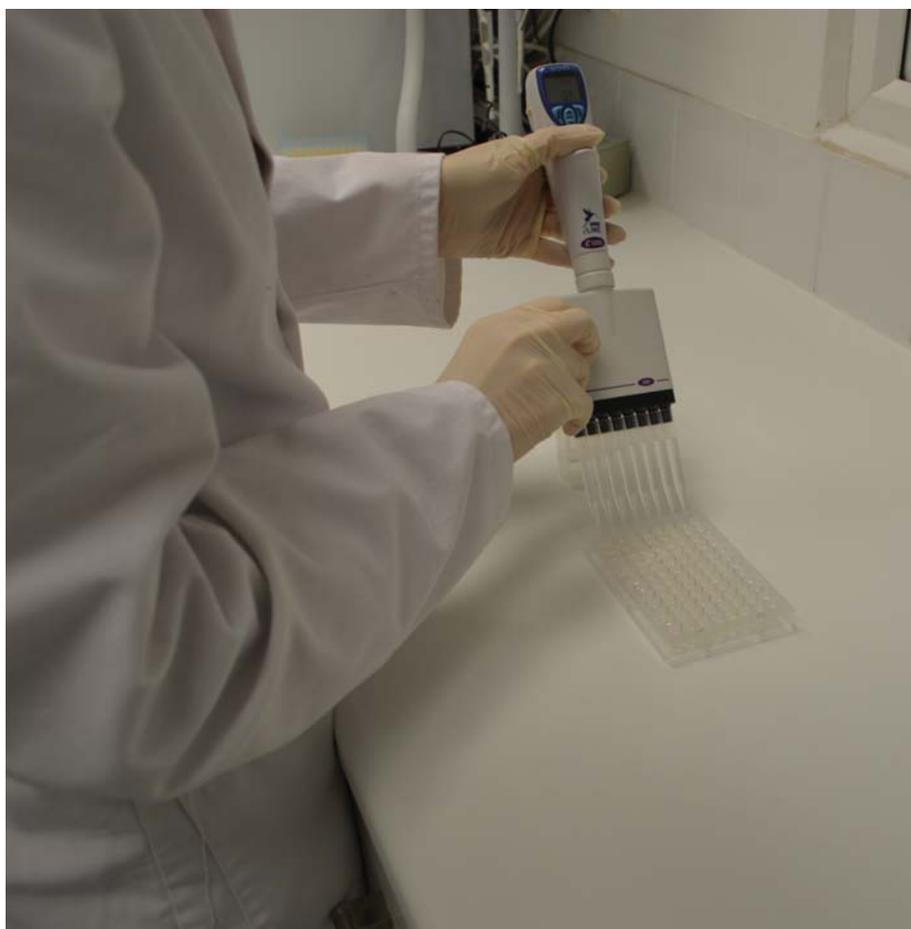
where the husbandry is at its optimum. However, that is not to say that new ideas and methods won't be found as we continually try to innovate and improve what we have already.

The use of a group of products called nutraceuticals which help to improve gut health – and, let's face it, most of our issues are gut related – have been found to be very powerful in reducing disease. Many of these products have been around for a long time and the benefits of organic acids in feed have been well established. The use of oregano has been advocated in the treatment of blackhead in poultry with great results, so why should we not consider this in feed to help reduce the incidence of Hexamita?

Once we investigated this area further, we found a large range of products that were claimed to have a beneficial effect on gut health and bird well-being, so we set about to trial some of these on our best managed sites. This has been on-going for several years and we have discovered that no single product is best, although some have very powerful effects.

Our key findings are that the programme works best on well-managed sites and that you need to use a range of different products as the bird develops.

We have called the programme “Seed, feed and weed”. Its main aim is to get a lot of positive bacteria (probiotics) into the gut early on to “seed” the intestine



with protective types. The gut of the gamebird is colonised with whatever bugs are in the chicks' environment and if these are from last year's poorly-washed sheds that had problems then, you are not off to a great start and more likely to see the effects of Rotavirus and other problems.

Once the gut has a culture of beneficial bacteria, we then want these to outgrow any competitive "bad" bacteria and there are a range of products here that can be used in water or in feed either on their own or together. This is the "feed" aspect of the programme.

Finally, the "weed" process looks to remove the harmful bacteria using non-antibiotic methods.

It was interesting to discover that by using the programme we understood that antibiotic treatment may well help to solve a problem in the short term, but the use of antibiotics will also kill off many of the protective bacteria and often allows the problem to rebound and require a further treatment.

We were delighted last year to see the positive effects of the programme in practice. The Exmoor keepers have



been my early adopters of the system and the benefits have been seen through a dramatic reduction of antibiotics used, better growth rates in poults and – most importantly – a noticeable improvement in flying ability.

We trialled the system on a game farm that had persistent problems with Hexamita in the rearing stage and subsequently on the shoots it supplied, but although we saw a clear improvement, we did still see some issues that we had to treat with antibiotics. Having said that, we are confident that some changes to the management structure in this case will result in improvements in performance.

One notable success we had was where

a large number of partridges were reared on a shoot for their own purposes. The management is excellent here and they did not use any antibiotic or coccidiosis treatments. Their season has been a great success with flying ability seen as an unexpected bonus.

It is interesting to see that our combined focus to rear and release birds with minimal intervention has reduced levels of antibiotics used and the cost. What we had not envisaged, and what is a great bonus, is that reports suggest improvements in the birds' sporting potential as well.

NOTE IT!

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