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Antibiotics Policy of the Australian Chicken Meat Industry

Version 2. 26 October 2005

Executive Summary

The primary objective of the chicken meat industry is to produce a healthy food. Chicken meat produced in Australia is healthy and nutritious. Eating chicken meat does not expose consumers to antibiotic residues or antibiotic resistance.

Antibiotics are substances that kill or inhibit the growth of bacteria and related microorganisms and are essential in human and animal medicine.

The use of antibiotics in chicken meat production in Australia is limited to two important functions:

- therapeutic agents (ie applied to treat the clinical symptoms of a bacterial infection)
- prophylactic agents (ie applied to healthy animals deemed to be at risk of infection to prevent disease occurring).

This policy sets out the guiding principles for the chicken meat industry to ensure that:

- **development of antibiotic resistance is minimised; and**
- **chicken meat is not contaminated with antibiotic residues.**

The industry funds **research** into alternatives such as vaccines for the use of antibiotics in chicken production, both at an industry-wide and individual company level. It also universally supports the Australian Government's **National Residue Survey**, which conducts regular independent checks of residues of antibiotics in chicken meat in Australia. This testing has consistently shown that chicken meat does not contain residues of antibiotics in Australia.

Background and Situation Analysis

The antibiotic properties of penicillin were discovered by Alexander Fleming in 1928, but it was left to an Australian, Howard Florey, to develop penicillin as an important

new tool in human medicine in 1939-41. Useful quantities became available towards the end of the Second World War.

As the number of antibiotic compounds and their use grew, it was found that some bacteria developed an ability to survive antibiotic treatment: the bacteria became resistant.

In response to this issue, governments, industry and scientists have been researching ways to manage the use of antibiotics to best advantage.

In one initiative, the Minister for Health and Aged Care and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, jointly established a Joint Expert Technical Advisory Committee on Antibiotic Resistance (JETACAR) in 1998.

JETACAR comprised experts from the areas of human health, veterinary medicine and primary industry. Its task was to determine if there was a scientific link between the use of antibiotics in food-producing animals and the emergence and selection of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and their spread to humans. It was also tasked with recommending future risk management strategies.

In response to the JETACAR report (1999), and to provide ongoing expert advice on measures to reduce the risk of antimicrobial resistance, the Australian Government established the Expert Advisory Group on Antimicrobial Resistance (EAGAR).

The implementation of the strategies for the responsible use of antibiotics in animals involves:

- The Veterinary Code of Practice (**Australian Veterinary Association**);
- **The Australian Veterinary Poultry Association's** "Code of Practice for the Use of Antibiotics in the Poultry Industry";
- **The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority** (APVMA) which assesses, registers and regulates veterinary medicines up to the point of sale;
- **The Food Standards Australia New Zealand** (FSANZ) which sets the maximum residue levels of chemicals in food;
- **The States** through their food safety bodies which ensure that regulations in line with Food Standards are in place and are complied with;
- **The States** through their control of use of veterinary chemicals;
- **The National Residue Survey**, funded by industry and carried out by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, which checks for the presence of residues of a number of compounds in chicken meat, including antibiotic residues and hormones;
- **The chicken meat industry** which ensures through its own guidelines, QA systems and contractual arrangements with growers, that its operation complies with the relevant laws and regulations and represents best practice.

Definitions and Scope

This policy, while relevant to the broader poultry industry, is specifically written for the chicken meat industry.

Antibiotics are substances that kill or inhibit the growth of bacteria and related microorganisms. They are essential substances in human and animal medicine.

This policy covers the use of antibiotics in two important ways:

- **therapeutic agents** (ie applied to treat the clinical symptoms of a bacterial infection)
- **prophylactic agents** (ie applied to healthy animals deemed to be at risk of infection to prevent disease occurring).

Importantly, no hormones are used in chicken meat production in Australia. The industry position regarding the use of antibiotics is that antibiotics should only be used as a last resort to control disease in birds that cannot be managed by other means.

Objectives and Basic Principles:

The primary objective of the chicken meat industry is to produce a healthy food.

To achieve this objective, chickens need to be healthy and well cared for; in other words, good farming practices are essential. However, even under perfect farming conditions and with preventative treatments such as vaccines in place, chickens may develop diseases. In instances where no vaccine is available or effective against severe bacterial infection, chickens may have to be treated with therapeutic antibiotics.

The industry understands that over time, just as in human health, bacteria may develop resistance to antibiotics to which they are exposed. To address this, the industry has taken steps over recent years to minimise the use of therapeutic antibiotics and to seek alternatives. The industry only uses antibiotics that are registered for use in poultry for meat production and consequently, reflecting APVMA's registration policy, does not use antibiotics with significant applications in human health in long-term preventative treatments.

Policy Statements:

This policy sets out the **guiding principles for the chicken meat industry** to ensure that the development of antibiotic resistance is minimised.

- Antibiotics must be used in strict compliance with the conditions imposed by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA), and only in cases where alternative treatment is not available.
- Antibiotics must not be used to promote growth, i.e. antibiotics are only to be used for therapeutic or preventative treatments against serious diseases such as necrotic enteritis. Industry shall not support any application for registration of an antibiotic indicated for use as a growth promotant.

- Antibiotics that are considered important for human use are not to be used in preventative treatments of chickens.
- Antibiotics must be used under veterinary supervision and in accordance with good veterinary practice.
- At all times, withholding periods (time between last use of pharmaceutical and earliest possible slaughter) are designed to ensure there is no antibiotic residue in the chicken meat. The industry agrees that the withholding periods set by regulatory authorities in Australia must be observed.
- Industry will continue to remind consumers that proper handling and cooking of chicken meat is the best way to ensure that meat is free of bacteria.

The industry actively supports research into alternative methods of treatment to minimise the use of therapeutic and prophylactic antibiotics. These are long-term investments likely to lead to further reduction in the use of antibiotics. As in human medicine, it is desirable to limit the use of antibiotics in order to limit the opportunity for bacteria to develop resistance to these compounds.

VRE (or Vancomycin Resistant Enterococcus) bacteria pose a serious human health threat in hospitals. Enterococci bacteria may develop resistance either by exposure to Vancomycin (used in human medicine but not in poultry in Australia) or possibly by exposure to Avoparcin, which has some similarities with Vancomycin and is an animal health antibiotic.

The chicken meat industry voluntarily stopped using Avoparcin in 1999 as a precautionary measure, even though the evidence available suggests that VREs found in chickens are of a different type to the majority of those found in Australian hospitals.

There is not a single case of VRE in humans in Australia, which can be linked to chicken. In addition to the high standard of quality practices followed by chicken producers as set out in this policy statement, good food preparation practices and normal cooking will kill all bacteria, including those resistant to Vancomycin.

The industry is committed to continue to fund the Australian Government's National Residue Survey to provide ongoing and independent evidence that chicken meat does not contain residues of antibiotics.