

The real story about antibiotics and laying hens

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The Australian Egg Corporation Ltd (AECL) would like to set the record straight on the issue of antibiotics and the egg industry, following some provocative comments on the ABC's 'Catalyst' program last night.



In the story, Professor Lindsay Grayson of Austin Health was quoted as saying:

Intensive farming practices, in many ways, have only been possible because of the increased and really inappropriate use of antibiotics. Where you've got millions of chickens on a one-acre lot, stacked one above the other, the top lot defecating on those below them, I mean, the spread of organisms is massive.

AECL Managing Director, James Kellaway, said Professor Grayson had painted a picture that was not an accurate reflection of egg farming and the use of antibiotics in the Australian egg industry.

“There is no egg farm in Australia that would have anything near one million let alone several million chickens on a one-acre lot. I am also unaware of any egg farm where the ‘top lot’ defecate ‘on those below them’,” Mr Kellaway said.

“The use of therapeutic antibiotics in the egg industry is very limited and only under the direction of a veterinarian responsible for the health and the welfare of hens and under the strict mandated requirements of the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority,” Mr Kellaway said.

Mr Kellaway noted that the movement of more hens into extensive farming systems (free range) compared to more intensive system (cage) had increased the challenges in controlling bacterial disease associated with the faecal-oral cycle and both internal and external parasites.

“Free range poultry do offer the challenges of the re-emergence of historical diseases and challenges with emergency animal diseases like Avian Influenza. These challenges are being accommodated with enhanced and improved husbandry, biosecurity policies and the use of effective and strategic vaccination programs,” he said.

AECL supports the comments in the story made by University of South Australia Microbiologist, Emeritus Professor Mary Barton, that stated:

I mean, despite all the mythology about the tons of antibiotics being fed to chickens, it's a total myth, and, in fact, there are a very restricted range of antibiotics that can be fed, for example, to, well, all chickens, but egg layers in particular.

“The range of antibiotics used in commercial eggs layers in Australia is heavily restricted compared to many other countries throughout the world,” he said.

The whole transcript of the Catalyst story can be viewed here:

<http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/4446258.htm>