

Last-ditch antibiotic used to make poultry grow quicker

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One of the world's antibiotics of last resort is being sold to bulk up chickens by the Indian company that owns Blackburn Rovers.

Venky's, which supplies fast food chains in India, is one of five companies openly selling colistin to boost animal growth, an investigation has found.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism was able to buy 200g of Venky's colistin in India without a prescription. Packet instructions say it "improves [feed conversion ratio] and weight gain" and Venky gave instructions on its website about its use "as a growth promoter" until contacted by the bureau.

Experts said using colistin in poultry farming was "complete and utter madness", warning that the medicine would be useless in little more than a decade.

Resistance to antibiotics is recognised by the World Health Organisation as one of the biggest threats to medicine. Treatments such as chemotherapy and hip replacement are likely to become impossible if bacteria develop resistance.

Colistin is used for infections that are resistant to nearly all other drugs and global concern was prompted by the discovery in 2015 of a gene that could make bacteria resistant to it. Timothy Walsh of Cardiff University, who made the discovery, said the investigation by the bureau and *The Hindu* newspaper was "deeply worrying".

Dame Sally Davies, England's chief medical officer, called for a global ban on such use of antibiotics: "If we have not banned growth promoters within five years we will have failed the global community."

Venky's is acting legally in India. The company said it met WHO guidelines because the antibiotic's use as a growth promoter was "only incidental, and customers are expected to go by the veterinarians' advice and avoid indiscriminate use". It said it would comply with any rule changes.

The company told the bureau: "Our antibiotic products are for therapeutic use, although some of these in mild doses can be used at a preventive level, which in turn may act as growth promoters."

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