A European farmers' view of free trade and risk assessment for veterinary biologicals

H. VAARKAMP *

Summary: In Europe, farmers request that they be supplied with the right drug in the right place for the right animal at the right price: no more, no less. They are not concerned which country or company produces the veterinary biologicals used. Farmers are advised by the veterinary practitioner, but knowledge of neither the country of manufacture nor the producer determines their choice. This attitude is due to the quality of the pharmaceutical products available.

European farmers support free trade and the implementation of scientific risk assessment. In the view of European farmers, the system of equivalent measurement should be adopted: countries may have different systems to check the quality of veterinary products, but the outcome should be the same, i.e. a guarantee of quality, safety and efficacy.

KEYWORDS: Free trade – Risk assessment – Veterinary biologicals.

Over eight million European farmers are represented in the ‘Committee of Agricultural Organisations in the European Union (EU) and the General Committee for Agricultural Co-operation in the EU’ (COPA/COGECA), the single European organisation which defends and represents the interests of farmers. To understand the perspective of European farmers with regard to the application of risk assessment to veterinary biologicals, one fact should be made clear: farmers wish to be supplied with the right drug in the right place for the right animal at the right price. No more, no less. This apparently simple demand is less straightforward than it seems. If the choice of a car is compared with the choice of a drug, the difference is obvious. All farmers (and veterinarians) will have some feelings about the model of car which they drive. Each has a highly illogical theory about the choice of that particular model. Despite knowing that every car must meet certain technical requirements to be offered for sale, almost all car owners have differing convictions regarding price/quality ratios. Quality, in a car, is a highly subjective matter.

The choice of veterinary biologicals is made in a very different manner. Only two questions concern the farmer here: is this the right vaccine for this animal? and is this the right price? Hardly any farmer knows which country is producing a given vaccine. Farmers urge their veterinarians to use an appropriate, affordable drug and that is virtually all. The farmers do not have any feelings about the name of the company on the label. Of course, the veterinarian may have an opinion about the source of the drugs

* Member, COPA/COGECA; Director, Veterinary Cooperative AUV, Beversestraat 23, 5431 SL Cuijk, The Netherlands.
prescribed. The veterinarian has expert knowledge of animal health products, and advises the farmer accordingly. Veterinarians also demand the right drug for the right price, but they are equipped with a more technical set of criteria. This is all quite different from the choice of a car!

The reason for the attitude of European farmers towards veterinary drugs is the quality of the pharmaceutical products. Obviously, farmers who decide to apply a vaccine against disease X expect never to see disease X again. Farmers are quite surprised if an outbreak of disease X occurs after vaccination. Much explanation is required about the equilibrium between attack and defence, and about serotypes, before farmers can understand this phenomenon. Nevertheless, these things happen. Vaccination against disease X, however, has never led to an outbreak of disease Y. Farmers never need to conduct risk assessments for biologicals, as they simply never fear an outbreak of disease Y as a result of vaccination against disease X. Such outbreaks never happen, due to the high quality of pharmaceutical products, whether these are produced in Europe or in the United States of America (USA); the latter is frequently the case.

In scientific terms, European farmers ask for **quality, efficacy** and **safety**. They expect a scientific risk assessment with satisfactory results. Today, the authorities in the USA seem to have a very simple risk assessment, as a ‘zero-risk’ policy is applied. This seems to indicate a fear that European biologicals may lead to the introduction of an exotic disease. Europe is connected by land to Asia, where many diseases occur which are exotic to Europe and the USA. As no ocean lies between the western part of Europe and the rest of the Asian-European continent, many people in the USA are worried that biologicals manufactured in the EU may be contaminated with some dangerous exotic disease.

Every EU Member State has a system to check the quality, efficacy and safety of veterinary biologicals. Measurements are all based on European Directives, which require Member States to have the same strict rules. While the testing and verification systems may be slightly different, the outcome is the same: quality, efficacy and safety.

The system used for risk assessment in the USA should protect the American people. Although the American system is rather different from the European one, the ultimate goal is the same (i.e. quality, efficacy and safety). Every country must ensure that the outcome of the testing and verification system employed is correct: when this is certain, the nature of the underlying systems should not be a cause for concern. The best solution for the existing problems is therefore **equivalent measurement**.

Farmers in Europe consider the USA as the architect of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT; now World Trade Organisation: WTO): free trade is part of the ‘American Dream’. European farmers are therefore puzzled to see the originators of GATT still working with a ‘zero-risk’ policy in relation to veterinary biologicals. Risk assessment on a scientific basis is the tool needed for free trade. In Dutch, a proverb says: ‘If you have said “A”, you should say “B”.’ Perhaps the reverse is even better: ‘Having said “B”, you cannot refuse to say “A”.’

In the opinion of European farmers, it is the duty of both the USA and Europe to work together on risk assessment to promote free trade. Farmers pay scientists to do their job: science is what is needed for risk assessment. European farmers have made a political choice in favour of free trade: they have paid politicians to create GATT. The USA and Europe are partners, both politically and scientifically. That is why European
farmers now expect to have the right biologicals at the right time for the right price, whatever the origin. They are not surprised to find that a biological they are using is produced by an American company, and they naturally trust this company as the evaluation system for biologicals in the USA is well known. Why should the American colleagues of European farmers be frightened of European products? European products are just as safe as American products, due to equivalent measurement.

It is possible to imagine people in the USA thinking of Europe as a ‘far-off’ continent connected to Asia, where many exotic diseases occur. Such vague ideas about geography may lead to anxieties about importing a compound from ‘that dangerous Eurasian continent’.

The reality is somewhat different. On the eve of the 21st century, farmers live in one world, economically. Free trade, based on scientific risk assessment, is an essential part of both the American Dream and the ‘European Dream’.

* * *

UN POINT DE VUE D’ÉLEVEURS EUROPÉENS SUR LE LIBRE ÉCHANGE ET L’ÉVALUATION DES RISQUES EN MATIÈRE DE PRODUITS BIOLOGIQUES À USAGE VÉTÉRINAIRE. – H. Vaarkamp.

Résumé: En Europe, les éleveurs désirent pouvoir acquérir le bon produit au bon moment pour le bon animal et à un bon prix ; ni plus, ni moins. Ils ne s’intéressent pas au pays ou à la société qui fabriquent le produit biologique vétérinaire qu’ils utilisent. Les éleveurs font leur choix en fonction des conseils de leur vétérinaire et non du pays de fabrication ou du producteur. Cette attitude s’explique par la qualité des produits pharmaceutiques disponibles.

Les éleveurs européens sont favorables au libre échange et à une évaluation scientifique des risques. De leur point de vue, il convient d’adopter des systèmes de contrôle équivalents. Chaque pays peut donc avoir sa propre méthode de vérification des produits vétérinaires, mais le résultat doit être le même, c’est-à-dire garantir la qualité, la sécurité et l’efficacidad del producto.


* * *

UN PUNTO DE VISTA DE GANADEROS EUROPEOS SOBRE EL LIBRE COMERCIO Y LA EVALUACIÓN DE RIESGOS EN MATERIA DE PRODUCTOS BIOLÓGICOS DE USO VETERINARIO. – H. Vaarkamp.

Resumen: En Europa, los ganaderos requieren que se les proporcione el medicamento adecuado en el momento adecuado para el animal adecuado y a un precio adecuado: ni más ni menos. No les preocupa el país de origen o el fabricante de los productos biológicos veterinarios que utilizan. El veterinario aconseja a los ganaderos, pero la elección de éstos no viene determinada por el conocimiento del país productor o la marca de fabricación de un producto. Tal actitud es resultado de la calidad de los productos farmacéuticos disponibles.
Los ganaderos europeos son favorables al libre comercio y a la implantación de una evaluación de riesgos científica. A juicio de los ganaderos debería adoptarse el sistema de baremos equivalentes: los sistemas de control de calidad para los productos de uso veterinario pueden ser distintos en cada país, pero el resultado de todos ellos debería ser el mismo, a saber, el de garantizar calidad, seguridad y eficacia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Evaluación de riesgos – Libre comercio – Productos biológicos de uso veterinario.