

Report on the 2024 Veterinary Antibiotic Amnesty



RESPONSIBLE USE OF MEDICINES ALLIANCE
RUMA
COMPANION ANIMAL & EQUINE

Published 20 March 2025 by RUMA CA&E

Report on the 2024 Veterinary Antibiotic Amnesty

Introduction and background

The third One Health Antibiotic Amnesty took place in veterinary practices across the UK during November 2024. Once again, the veterinary community came together to support this important initiative. The Antibiotic Amnesty promotes the concept of safe and responsible disposal of antibiotics to pet owners while providing a wider awareness and understanding about antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

This year the campaign was once again project managed and largely funded by the Responsible Use of Medicines Alliance - Companion Animal and Equine (RUMA CA&E) which has taken the Amnesty on as a flagship campaign aligned to its vision and mission. RUMA CA&E was pleased to secure part funding for the 2024 Antibiotic Amnesty from Zoetis and is very grateful for this support. The RUMA CA&E Alliance will be leading and co-ordinating the campaign again in 2025.

The Antibiotic Amnesty takes place annually every November. The timing takes into account the enhanced focus on AMR and antimicrobial stewardship (AMS) during the month due to global activities such as World Antimicrobial Resistance Awareness Week (WAAW)¹, European Antibiotic Awareness Day (EAAD)², the launch of the RUMA Agriculture Targets Task Force Report³, both online and face-to-face events showcasing the industry's engagement with AMR, the launch of The Veterinary Medicines Directorate's (VMD) UK-Veterinary Antibiotic Resistance Sales Surveillance (2022) Report⁴, and numerous other sector AMS initiatives. The Veterinary Antibiotic Amnesty has a core focus on companion animal and equine practice.

For the veterinary Antibiotic Amnesty, veterinary practices were invited to reach out to their client base and encourage the return of unused (or partially unused) packs of antibiotics for safe disposal. The environmental impact of disposing of these medicines inappropriately is placed at the forefront of communications, alongside the dangers of using leftover antibiotics on pets without veterinary guidance.

The overarching aims of an initiative such as the Antibiotic Amnesty, is to focus attention and efforts both across the profession and in support of educating pet owners about the role they can also play in preventing AMR through AMS activities.

Responsibly administering antibiotics to pets only when needed represents a key stewardship goal, but any benefit can be reduced if the unused antibiotics end up polluting the environment due to unsafe/improper disposal, or if owners save unused antibiotics for future use.

¹ [World AMR Awareness Week](#)

² [Home | EUROPEAN ANTIBIOTIC AWARENESS DAY](#)

³ [RUMA Targets Task Force – RUMA](#)

⁴ [UK-VARSS 2023 Highlights - GOV.UK](#)

It is also recognised that, whilst the November Amnesty campaign gives specific and timely focus to the AMR topic, it is important to ensure that pet owners know and understand that returning out of date/unused antibiotics can and should happen at any time of the year.

Previous research has shown that a third of people hold onto their own unused antibiotics for potential future reuse (either for themselves or for friends and family). This behaviour is associated with a serious risk of adverse effects since antibiotics may be used in inappropriate situations, can delay the administration of proper care or may interact negatively with other medications that are administered. Pet owners may similarly store unused antibiotics for their pets for future reuse (due to recurrence of similar clinical signs in the same or another pet in the household). Using antibiotics in such a way poses a greater risk of AMR spreading or emerging compared to prescribed use, due to under-dosing, wrong course length, inappropriate medication or inappropriate administration. The fact that veterinary antibiotics must be paid for may further exacerbate this hoarding approach.

The 2023 RCVS Practice Standards Scheme includes provisions that encourage veterinarians to facilitate the return of all unused pharmaceuticals (not just antibiotics) for appropriate disposal. This is a positive step, but it still needs ongoing focus and communication efforts by practices to owners in order to avoid inappropriate disposal.

An **Antibiotic Amnesty** is a campaign to encourage members of the public to return unused or unwanted antibiotics to appropriate sites for safe disposal. During the campaign, messages about the potential harms of storing unused/unwanted antibiotics in their homes, the risks of sharing them or taking them at a later date, and the harmful environmental impact of disposing of them via domestic waste or into sewage are directed at the public and delivered by healthcare professionals and health promotion campaigns.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared that antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is one of the top 10 global public health threats facing humanity. The veterinary profession is already actively engaged in promoting prudent antimicrobial use and, has developed resources including the BSAVA/SAMSoc PROTECT ME poster to raise awareness. The livestock side of the veterinary sector is more advanced in its AMS infrastructure having developed specific sector reduction targets for antibiotic use via the RUMA Agriculture Targets Task Force Group, the first targets of which were published back in 2017. Efforts in the farming livestock sectors has seen UK antibiotic sales for food-producing animals reduce by 59% since 2014. This represents the lowest sales to date. Sales of Highest Priority Important Antibiotics (HP-CIAs) in food-producing animals remain at very low levels and account for less than 0.5% of total sales.

Antibiotic use in the pet and equine sectors is very different to agriculture. One notable difference is the close bond and living proximity which exists between pet and owner which increases the potential for micro-organisms and bacteria to transfer from pets to humans (and vice versa). This means that even low use of antimicrobials in these sectors could lead to resistance to key medicines, through the transfer between owners and pets or horses. In the interests of One Health, this is why the CA&E sectors are a very important consideration when we are thinking about antimicrobial stewardship and AMR.

Limitations of the survey results

- The survey is a voluntary process and captures the feedback from practices who have actively chosen to respond. It is therefore acknowledged that more practices could well have taken part in the amnesty than the survey results capture. Therefore, these results provide a high-level 'snapshot' of the campaign. It is likely that a greater number of practices did participate given the high number of additional practices that signed up for campaign information this year. An additional 333 practices signalled their interest in the amnesty (in addition to those that were already signed up from 2023), giving a combined total of 650 contacts that received campaign communications in 2024. In addition, the volume of traffic to the campaign website page increased by 35% versus 2023.
- The focus on AMS has been growing in both awareness and direct action through various initiatives across the CA&E sectors in recent years. It is hoped that this increased focus is starting to positively impact on the levels of prescribing of antibiotics i.e. fewer antibiotics are being prescribed. Information published in the VARRS Report and RUMA Companion Animal and Equine Annual Report indicates that in some CA&E species there is a reduction in sales in recent years indicating a change in prescribing behaviours. In dogs, antibiotic use using the mg/kg metric has decreased year-on-year since 2016, except for between 2020 and 2021 and there has been a 15% reduction between 2022-2023. In cats, antibiotic use decreased between 2014 and 2015 but since then has shown a small but steady upward trend, with a decrease between 2021 and 2022 and an 11% increase between 2022-2023. Meanwhile, use of HP-CIAs in dogs remains at its lowest since 2014. In dogs there has been a 14% reduction between 2022 and 2023 and a nine-year overall reduction of 57%. In cats there has been a reduction of 16% between 2022 and 2023 and a nine-year overall reduction of 42%. This could mean that owners have less unused antibiotics to return. While recovering leftover antibiotics remains a core aim of the campaign (providing a tangible reporting metric), if fewer antibiotics are being prescribed in the first place and more advice and guidance is being provided about AMR there may be fewer to return overall. Some practices are also conveying the responsible disposal/return message throughout the year and not just during the main campaign period.

A number of comments from practices in the feedback survey concur with some of these considerations as follows:

'Despite the low figures of antibiotics returned this month, we see this as a positive as we have been trying hard as a practice to reduce the dispensing of antibiotics overall and pushing for courses to be completed fully when they are required.'

‘We had a lot more antibiotic tablets returned during last year’s amnesty and since then we have accepted returned meds throughout the year, with labels on any antibiotics dispensed reminding owners to bring them back.’

‘We did not have any clients that had leftover medications from the conversations we had with them. When prescribed we all emphasise the importance of completing a course.’

‘Our use of antibiotics is fairly minimal and we believe our clients are compliant in completing course, hence the lack of returns.’

Overall results of the 2024 Antibiotic Amnesty

The campaign secured the return of 2,148 antibiotic tablets, 136 topical preparations, 47 injections and 82 bottles of oral liquid preparations. This can be compared to last year and the first year in the table below.

	Tablets	Topicals	Injections	Liquids	Total
2022	787	53	17	Not asked	857
2023	2458	119	11	160	2,748
2024	2148	136	47	82	2,413

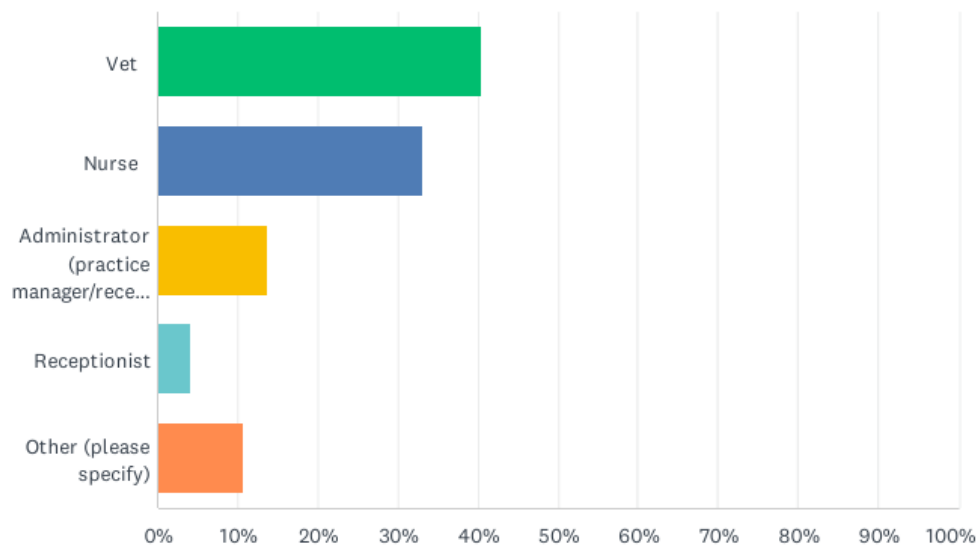
The type and range of antibiotics returned was similar to 2023 as were the practice demographics.

There were 142 survey responses to the campaign evaluation survey (of which 94 practices reported taking part in the Antibiotic Amnesty). This compares to 131 survey responses last year of whom 111 practices reported taking part in 2023 versus 66 in 2022. Broadly, this is accepted as being another successful year for the campaign and RUMA CA&E acknowledges the limitations of the survey results and the likelihood of other influencing factors as outlined earlier.

Even with fewer practices responding to the campaign survey, there has been an increased number of injections and topicals returned.

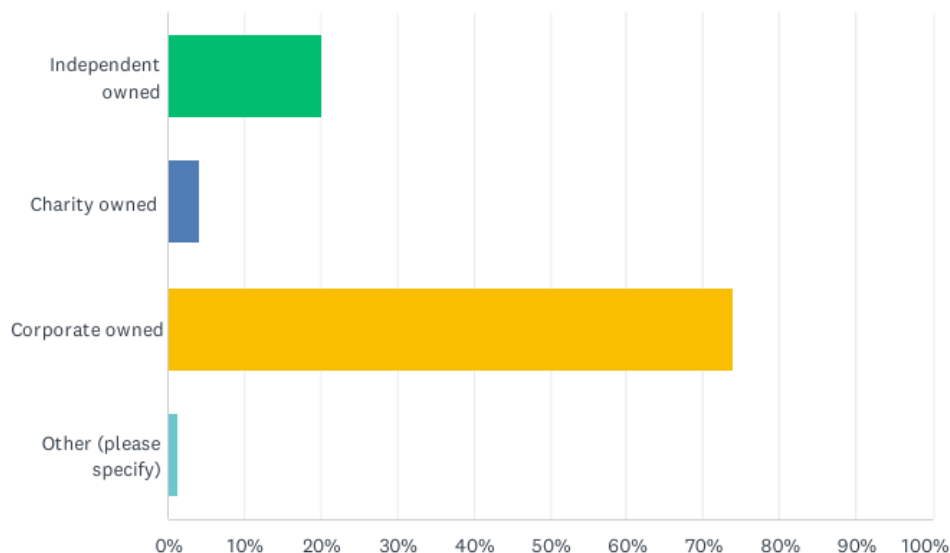
Survey results in detail

What is your role in practice?



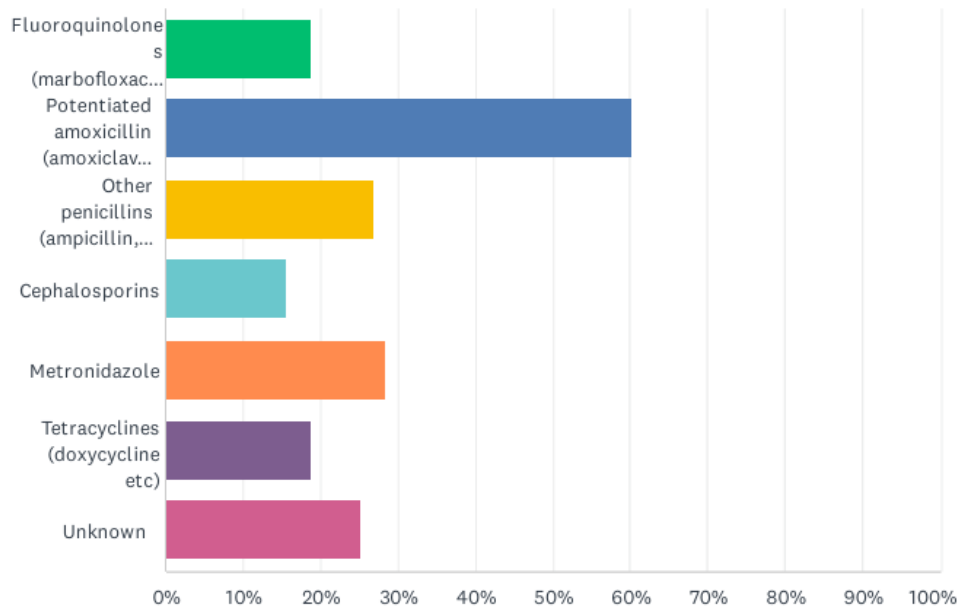
Of the 94 practices who responded to the campaign survey that confirmed they took part in the amnesty, the majority of respondents were vets (41%) followed by nurses 33%. Administrators, receptionists and other roles made up the remaining roles feeding back to the survey; this suggests that the primary roles driving the campaign in the practice environment are vets and nurses.

Type of practice



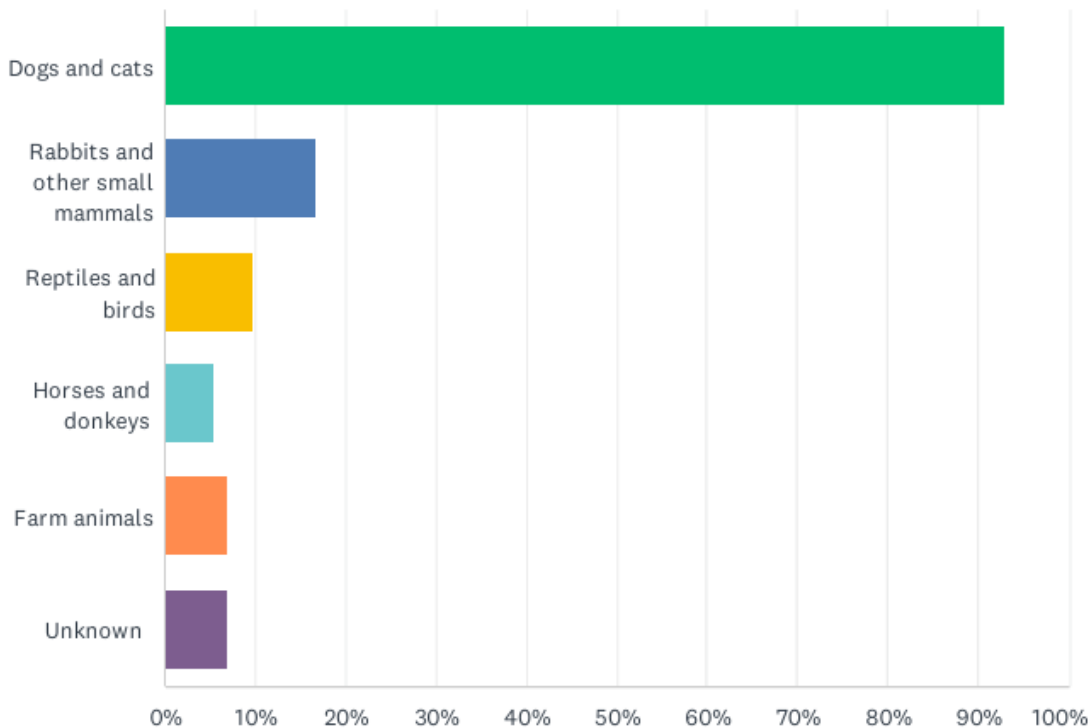
By far the largest percentage of practices that confirmed participation in the feedback survey were corporate owned at 74% with independent practices at 20% and charity owned at 4%. Corporate veterinary organisations and independents were very well represented on the stakeholder working group for the amnesty; an increase in the level of engagement they were undertaking with the practice types they represented was reported.

What types of antibiotics were returned?



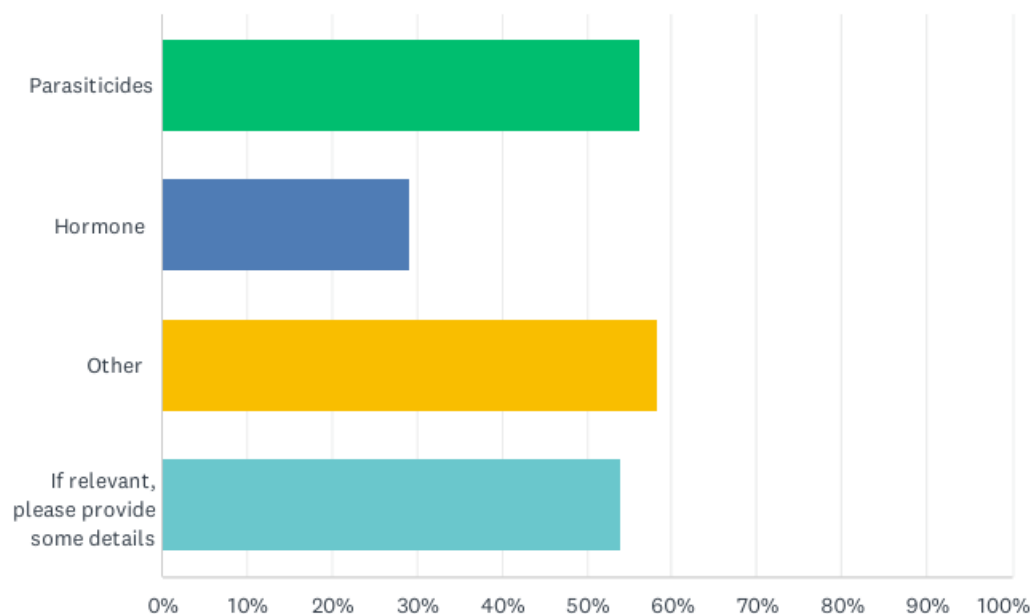
The types of antibiotics returned is not dissimilar to previous years. The removal of these medications from the community and the assurance that they will be disposed of correctly represents a successful outcome of this project.

For which groups of species were these antibiotics originally intended?



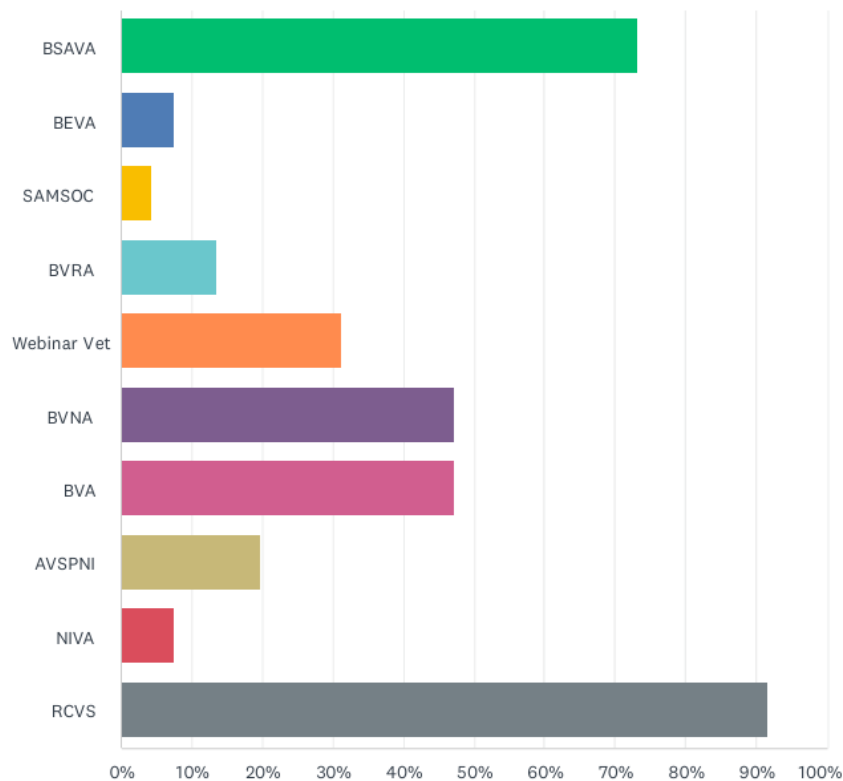
Not unexpectedly, the majority of returned antibiotics were intended for cats and dogs (93%) followed by rabbits and small mammals (16%), reptiles and birds (10%) equines (5%). It is interesting to note that a small proportion were also for farm animals (7%); while the campaign is focused on companion animals and equines, it is pleasing to see that the message has extended to cover farm animals too.

If other types of medicines (i.e. not antibiotics) were returned during November, please share details of what these were



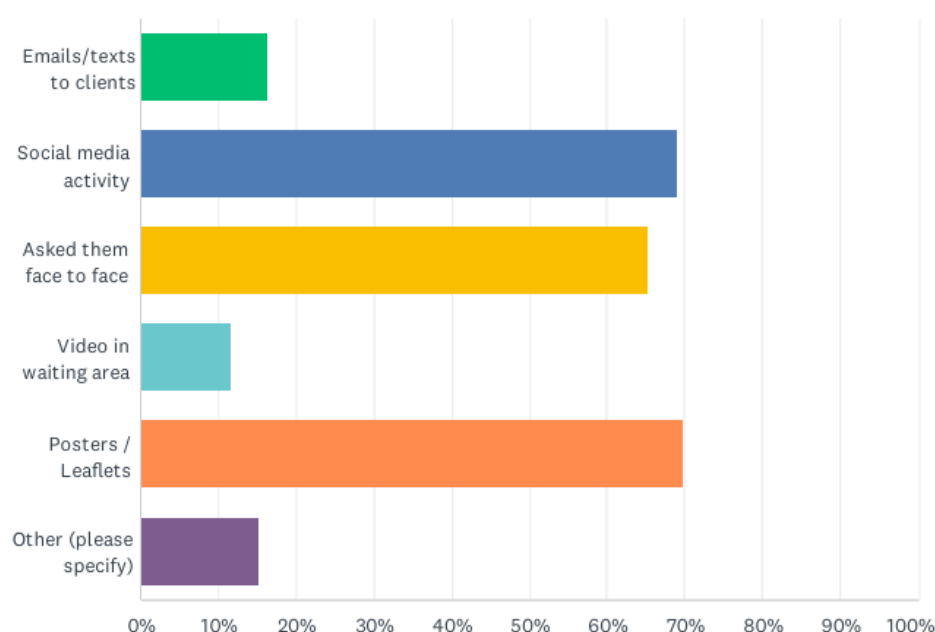
While the focus of the campaign has been on securing the return of antibiotics, the campaign also encouraged practices to widen the discussion to remind owners that any unused veterinary medicines of any type could be returned for safe disposal. Indeed, practices were also encouraged to communicate that returning unused medicines can happen at any time and not just in November. It is particularly encouraging to see the return of medicines such as parasiticides and hormones in addition to antibiotics. This is another positive outcome for the campaign and has ensured that these medicines are also being safely disposed of rather than owners taking matters into their own hands which could have resulted in them being disposed of in household waste or down the toilet. In the category of 'other', practices reported the return of medications such as NSAIDs, pain relief, steroids, heart medication, ear drops. There was also a report of human drugs including antacids and contraceptive tablets being returned.

Which of the participating organisations are you, or people in your practice, a member of?



In previous years, the majority of respondents were members of BSAVA and while BSAVA membership is still a dominant membership organisation among respondents, there has been an increase in responses from those that are members of other organisations which reflects the increased communication and stakeholder engagement undertaken.

Which methods did your practice use to encourage owners to bring unused antibiotics back?



An online practice toolkit to support campaign communications (both internally to engage practice teams and externally for use with clients) was once again made available on the RUMA CA&E website. This contained posters, campaign guidance, pre-written content for social media including imagery, as well as other helpful campaign assets to help make taking part as easy as possible. This was very popular and practice feedback was very positive. It is clear from the feedback that a good mix of communication tactics were adopted by practices with social media, face to face engagement, posters and leaflets being the most favoured options.

Campaign communications

For 2024, a further refined and enhanced set of communications assets for practices to use to publicise the campaign were produced and made available in a campaign toolkit hosted on the RUMA CA&E website. The publicity for the campaign commenced in Q2 2024 to ensure the profession was made aware of the campaign as early as possible both across stakeholder communications channels and in sector/professional media.

Practices were again encouraged to 'sign-up' via the RUMA CA&E website to receive ongoing campaign information and updates. This enabled regular communications to be issued about the Antibiotic Amnesty to help keep practices engaged, provide support, and update them on latest developments such as when new resources were made available for download. Some 333 new practices signed up to the campaign this year, giving a combined total of 650 practice contacts that cumulatively received communications in 2024.

Over the campaign period, 15 email communications were issued to practices containing amnesty information. The amnesty campaign page on the RUMA CA&E website was visited by 2,837 (1,985 in 2023) individual users between July 1st 2023 and Dec 31st 2023 – an uplift of 35%. This page was visited 4,380 times (versus 3,214 in 2023) by those users (+31% YOY), and they completed a total of 20,218 functions on that page (versus 14,792 in 2023) such as clicking links, downloading documents etc (+31% YOY).

The amnesty campaign toolkit contained an updated suite of downloadable communications assets to help practices and veterinary organisations promote the campaign to the profession, public, and pet owners via press, social media messages, website banners, and newsletters and included posters, client handouts, an animated film and factsheets, plus a choice of XX social media graphics. Resources were made available to all veterinary practices from the RUMA CAE ([vet antibiotic amnesty – RUMA CA&E \(rumacae.org.uk\)](https://vetantibioticamnesty-ruma-cae.org.uk)) website.

Practices were encouraged to have a dedicated antibiotic collection box for the month of November and to record the number of returned complete and part packs of antibiotics. A practice survey to capture the amnesty results was again hosted by the BSAVA and incentivised, with everyone who submitted information entering a prize draw.

All veterinary campaign partners shared frequent updates and content across their internal newsletters, websites and social platforms about the campaign. The 2024 promotional activity saw an increase in the level of campaign message dissemination and frequency of it, from all campaign stakeholders. This involved campaign branding in internal comms such as newsletters and across stakeholder social media channels as well as in some cases, key campaign tactics being developed and delivered by stakeholders such as the development of specific amnesty blogs, podcasts and articles for use across internal communications channels. The collaborative, integrated and sustained efforts across all stakeholder communications channels to drive visibility of the campaign, is seen as a key contributing factor in the level of practices and veterinary organisations subscribing to receive campaign information.

Across social media platforms, stakeholder organisations shared an increased volume of posts about the campaign over a much longer period of time. Circa 55 + posts were shared which is an uplift on the 2022 campaign during which there were around 27 social media posts.

It is important to note that across earned media, owned channels and social media we can only provide a broad snapshot of activity based on the feedback received from stakeholders. We know that there has been even more communications activity that has been undertaken by individual practices in their newsletters and social media channels, in numerous stakeholder newsletters and in other media titles that are not trackable and therefore can't be reflected in this evaluation.

Conclusions

The 2024 Veterinary Antibiotic Amnesty once again secured the return of antibiotics which otherwise could have been disposed of irresponsibly or used for treatment inappropriately. In addition, the campaign also saw the return of other classes of veterinary medicines such as parasiticides and hormones. Whilst the overall volume of returned antibiotics was slightly reduced (by 12% overall) compared to 2023, the amount returned is still significant and has been disposed of safely. 2024 also saw the return of other medications - the volume of which has not formally been captured but are also important to note.

The 2024 campaign was again supported by a sustained, proactive, and cohesive communications strategy which was fully supported by all participating stakeholders.

The sign-up rate to the campaign from new practices and veterinary organisations saw a further uplift of 105%

The veterinary community once again worked collaboratively and with enthusiasm to embrace the Antibiotic Amnesty initiative helping to secure the safe disposal of antibiotics that could otherwise have been disposed of inappropriately.

The additional resources and assets for the campaign proved popular with the veterinary community and generated much interest and support. The amnesty campaign page on the RUMA CA&E website saw a 35% uplift in visitors versus 2023.

Given the profession's ongoing commitment to the responsible use and disposal of all veterinary medicines, RUMA CA&E alongside the Antibiotic Amnesty stakeholders, will explore how best to widen the remit of the campaign and evolve the messaging to include other classes of medicines more overtly in 2025, details of which will be shared in due course.

Acknowledgements

- RUMA CA&E – for its project management and funding of the campaign
- Zoetis – for part sponsorship of the campaign 
- The Antibiotic Amnesty Core Stakeholder Group who play a key role in the decision-making process throughout the campaign and amplification of the campaign
- All stakeholder organisations who helped co-ordinate the campaign and disseminate information across their networks and organisational communications channels
- BSAVA for their ongoing support and provision of the survey platform to support the evaluation process
- Steve Howard, Gwyn Jones, Fergus Allerton, Ian Ramsey and Mary Bawn – core project management team for the Antibiotic Amnesty

With thanks to all stakeholders that took part in the campaign