

## Residue and Human Risk: A Reassessment of Aminoglycoside Residues in Edible Tissues

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### ABSTRACT

Aminoglycosides are a group of antibiotics widely used in both human and veterinary medicine, primarily for the treatment of bacterial infections. These drugs, including gentamicin, neomycin, and tobramycin, are poorly absorbed when taken orally and are therefore primarily administered via injection, although oral formulations are also available for the treatment of certain enteral infections. The primary concern with the use of aminoglycosides in veterinary medicine, especially in food-producing animals, is the potential risk for drug residues in products such as meat, milk, and eggs, staples of the human diet. Antibiotic residues can be harmful to humans, potentially causing adverse effects or contributing to antimicrobial resistance (AMR). However, the pharmacokinetics of aminoglycosides, particularly their limited absorption when ingested orally, raise significant questions about the justification for current withdrawal times. Since these drugs are poorly absorbed by the gastrointestinal tract, the risk of residue accumulation capable of producing adverse effects in consumers is minimal. The aim of this review is to investigate whether current withdrawal times for aminoglycosides, particularly when residues are ingested orally by humans, are scientifically justified. The review evaluates the pharmacokinetic profiles, regulatory guidelines, and the associated risks of drug residues from oral exposure. The findings suggest that the risk of residue-induced adverse effects is negligible, as oral aminoglycosides are poorly absorbed and primarily act locally within the gastrointestinal system. Therefore, the review argues that current withdrawal times may be unnecessary and need to be reevaluated. Further research on residue persistence in food products following oral administration is necessary to optimize withdrawal guidelines.

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## INTRODUCTION

Veterinary drug residues in food products are indeed a significant concern for food safety and public health. The presence of these residues can lead to various issues in humans (Arsène et al., 2022). Exposure to high levels of drug residues can lead to toxic effects, depending on the

pharmacological properties of the drug (Colopi et al., 2024). For example, some drugs can accumulate in some organs such as the liver or kidneys, potentially causing cellular damage (Beyene, 2015). Residues of certain anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g., phenylbutazone) have been linked to blood disorders and other toxicological risks (Worboys & Toon, 2018).

Prolonged exposure to antibiotic residues in food may contribute to the development of resistant bacteria (Menkem et al., 2019). Antibiotics can exert selective pressure on microbial populations, favoring the growth of resistant strains (Tello et al., 2012). Over time, resistant bacteria in the gut microbiota may transfer resistance genes to pathogenic bacteria via mechanisms such as horizontal gene transfer (McInnes et al., 2020). This process can compromise the efficacy of antibiotic treatments for bacterial infections, posing a significant public health challenges (Mancuso et al., 2021). The issue is particularly concerning in foods like meat, milk, and eggs, which are susceptible to contamination during production if withdrawal periods are not properly followed (Kan & Meijer, 2007).

Certain individuals may develop allergic reactions to drug residues present in food (Herago, 2021). While rare, these reactions can range from mild hypersensitivity symptoms (e.g., skin rash) to severe anaphylactic responses (Bumbăcea et al., 2024).

Residues of antibiotics in food, even at low levels, can disrupt the delicate balance of the human gut microbiota (Ben et al., 2019). The gut microbiota plays a critical role in digestion, immune function, and metabolic health (Vernocchi et al., 2020). Antibiotic residues can reduce microbial diversity, promoting dysbiosis (an imbalance of gut bacteria) and associated health issues such as inflammatory bowel disease, obesity, and caused weak immune responses (Dudek-Wicher et al., 2018). This disruption is especially significant with broad-spectrum antibiotics that target a wide range of bacteria (Avis et al., 2021).

The extent to which these residues affect human health depends on several factors. Pharmacokinetic aspects of the drug such as absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion determine whether drug residues reach target organs in biologically active forms (Beyene, 2015). Drugs with low oral bioavailability (e.g., aminoglycosides) are less likely to cause systemic effects, whereas lipophilic drugs may be absorbed more readily and accumulate in fatty tissues (Porter et al., 2007).

Another important factor determining the risk associated with drug residues is the dose and duration of exposure (Boobis et al., 2017). The frequency and amount of contaminated food consumption play a crucial role in determining health risks (Mohammed & Shehasen, 2020). Occasional exposure to low residue levels may pose minimal risks, but chronic exposure, especially to drugs with cumulative toxicity, can have significant long-term effects. Foods from animals treated repeatedly with Veterinary drugs or where withdrawal periods were not observed pose higher risks (Wassenaar, 2005).

Aminoglycosides are a class of broad-spectrum antibiotics used primarily in the treatment of bacterial infections in both human and Veterinary medicine (Van Duijkeren et

al., 2019). Aminoglycosides are bactericidal antibiotics primarily used mainly to treat severe infections caused by aerobic Gram-negative bacteria (Pagkalis et al., 2011).

Chemically, the aminoglycoside antibiotics such as streptomycin, dihydrostreptomycin, kanamycin, gentamicin, tobramycin, amikacin, and neomycin are large molecules characterized by numerous amino acid groups, making them highly basic polycations. At physiological pH, they remain highly ionized due to their polarity, which influences their shared pharmacokinetic properties. Aminoglycosides are highly cationic and polar in nature which restricts their ability to cross biological membranes (Bailey et al., 2013)

They consist of a hexose nucleus with amino sugars attached via glycosidic linkages, classifying them as aminocyclitols or aminoglycosidic aminocyclitols (Darlow et al., 2021).

Aminoglycosides exert their effect by penetrating bacterial cells, a process enhanced when combined with beta-lactam antibiotics, which disrupt bacterial cell wall synthesis (Adeniyi ADEFEGHA, 2019). Aerobic Gram-negative bacteria actively transport aminoglycosides into the cell through an oxygen-dependent mechanism, where the cationic aminoglycosides bind to negatively charged lipopolysaccharides in the bacterial membrane, displacing divalent cations such as  $Ca^{2+}$  and  $Mg^{2+}$  (Webster & Shepherd, 2023). This interaction alters membrane permeability and facilitates antibiotic entry. Once inside, aminoglycosides irreversibly bind to the 30S ribosomal subunit, causing genetic code misreading and disrupting protein synthesis (Barnhill et al., 2012). These changes compromise membrane integrity, leading to further antibiotic uptake, additional damage, and eventual bacterial cell death (Kohanski et al., 2010).

Oral route is the most used route for drug administration (Raihan et al., 2024) but for some reasons such as absorption problems. Aminoglycosides, including gentamicin, neomycin, and tobramycin, are typically administered parenterally (by injection), as they are poorly absorbed when taken orally (Bhattacharjee et al., 2023).

In Veterinary medicine, aminoglycosides are used to treat systemic and localized infections in livestock and poultry, especially in cases of respiratory infections, wound infections, and gastrointestinal infections (Page & Gautier, 2012).

Besides having beneficial therapeutic effects, aminoglycosides have some adverse effects (Arunvikram et al., 2014), despite which they remain critical for treating severe Gram-negative and some gram positive infections in human as well as in Veterinary medicine including food animal medicine (Table 1). Aminoglycosides used in food producing animals leads to prolonged drug residues, which is why their off-label use in mentioned animals is strongly discouraged (Rana et al., 2019).

**Table 1.** Overview of aminoglycosides, their applications in human and veterinary medicine, and key notes on their usage).

Aminoglycoside	Human Use	Veterinary Use	Notes
<b>Gentamicin</b>	Treats serious infections (e.g., sepsis, respiratory, and skin infections) (Karunarithna, 2024).	Treats infections in livestock, pets, and aquaculture (Van Duijkeren et al., 2019).	Widely used in both fields.
<b>Amikacin</b>	Used against multidrug-resistant infections (e.g., Multidrug-resistant tuberculosis) (Chiang et al., 2019).	Treats severe infections in horses and companion animals (Isgren, 2022).	Effective in cases with resistance concerns.
<b>Neomycin</b>	skin infections, bowel preparation (Arezzo et al., 2021).	Prophylactic use in livestock (Cangiano et al., 2023).	High local effectiveness with minimal systemic absorption.
<b>Streptomycin</b>	Historically used for tuberculosis; less common now due to resistance (Rocha et al., 2021).	Treats specific bacterial infections in livestock mainly in combination with penicillin (Tufa et al., 2021).	Often replaced in human medicine by newer antibiotics.
<b>Dihydrostreptomycin</b>	Not used.	Veterinary-only for bacterial infections in animals (Herago, 2021).	Analog of streptomycin optimized for veterinary use.
<b>Apramycin</b>	Not used.	Treats enteric infections in livestock (e.g., cattle) (Herrero-Fresno et al., 2016).	Primarily for Gram-negative bacteria.
<b>Spectinomycin</b>	Not commonly used; has some applications as a second-line treatment (Scherman et al., 2014).	Treats enteric infections in animals (Bergwerff, 1998).	Veterinary antibiotic with limited human applications.

Withdrawal period (also known as withdrawal times, withholding times, clearance times), refers to the period after administration of medication last dose to a food producing animal (Toutain, 2010) (Table 2) during which milk, eggs, or meat from them cannot be sold and consumed because of risk of drug residue toxicological concern (Desa & Jimma, 2020). After this time, the levels of drug residues in the animal body decrease to safe limits (Passantino & Russo, 2008). Antibiotics in food animals can leave residues in meat if withdrawal periods are not followed (Tadesse & Tadesse, 2017).

**Table 2.** Aminoglycosides some withdrawal times in food producing animals.

Animal Species	Drug	Withdrawal Period/Days	Route of Administration	Reference
<b>Cattle</b>	Dihydrostreptomycin	10 days	Oral	(Jalal et al., 2015)
<b>Cattle</b>	Dihydrostreptomycin	30 days	Injection	(Jalal et al., 2015)

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<b>Cattle</b>	Streptomycin	2 days	Oral	(Gehring et al., 2005)
<b>Cattle</b>	Neomycin	1 day	Oral	(Gehring et al., 2005)
<b>Sheep and Goat</b>	Dihydrostreptomycin	30 days	Injection	(Jalal et al., 2015)
<b>Sheep and Goat</b>	Neomycin	2 days	Oral	(Gehring et al., 2005)
<b>Chickens</b>	Streptomycin	4 days	Oral	(Gehring et al., 2005)
<b>Chickens</b>	Gentamicin	35 days	Subcutaneous	(Gehring et al., 2005)

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Reviewing the literature shows that residues of these antibiotics in meat, milk, and eggs pose risks to human health, including allergic reactions, ototoxicity, nephrotoxicity, neurotoxicity and the potential for AMR development (Pancu et al., 2021). To minimize these risks, regulatory agencies like the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), European Medicines Agency (EMA), and Codex Alimentarius have set maximum residue limits (MRLs) and withdrawal times for drugs used in food-producing animals (Canton et al., 2021). Withdrawal times are the minimum period that must pass between the last administration of a drug and the harvesting of meat, milk, or eggs to ensure that drug residues do not exceed safe limits for human consumption (Concordet & Toutain, 1997).

However, the justification for such withdrawal times for aminoglycosides residues is unclear, since oral aminoglycosides are poorly absorbed in the gastrointestinal tract and are largely excreted through the feces (Almeida et al., 2014), so there is minimal risk of these drugs entering systemic circulation and distributing to organs in which they may produce adverse effects. This leads to the central research question for this review: Are current withdrawal times for aminoglycosides scientifically justified, particularly when residues in food products are ingested orally?

The current research gap lies in the limited studies addressing the pharmacokinetics and residue persistence of oral aminoglycosides. Thus, the primary objective of this review is to explore whether the withdrawal periods for aminoglycosides are scientifically justified, especially considering their minimal absorption and limited risk of residue accumulation in animal origin food.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using databases such as PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science (Shah et al., 2017). Search terms included: aminoglycosides, residue persistence, withdrawal times, antimicrobial resistance, and food safety. The search focused on most related studies (Snyder, 2019) that examined the pharmacokinetics, residue levels, toxicity risks and regulatory considerations related aminoglycosides used in food producing animals as well as in human.

Inclusion criteria were studies discussing aminoglycoside use in Veterinary settings, particularly oral formulations, as well as research examining withdrawal times and drug residues in animal origin foods. Data on pharmacokinetics and antimicrobial resistance in human beings were also included.

## **RESULTS**

The central theme of this review is whether withdrawal times for oral aminoglycosides are warranted, considering the poor absorption of these drugs in the gastrointestinal tract and the minimal risk of residues in edible tissues or animal origin food. The findings show that Veterinary drug residues in food can pose significant health risks, including organ damage, antimicrobial resistance, allergic reactions, and disruption of gut microbiota. While regulatory agencies have established withdrawal times to mitigate these risks, the rationale for applying them to oral aminoglycosides remains unclear. Given their minimal systemic impact and fecal excretion, reevaluating current withdrawal guidelines for these drugs could be warranted.

Aminoglycosides are a class of broad-spectrum antibiotics primarily used to treat severe Gram-negative bacterial infections in both human and veterinary medicine. Drugs with low oral bioavailability, such as aminoglycosides, are less likely to cause systemic effects, whereas lipophilic drugs may accumulate in fatty tissues.

Withdrawal periods, the time required after drug administration to ensure drug residues in meat, milk, or eggs fall below safe limits, are critical for minimizing health risks. Current withdrawal times for aminoglycosides vary depending on the drug, species, and route of administration. Regulatory agencies have established maximum residue limits and withdrawal times to mitigate these risks.

The justification for current withdrawal times for aminoglycosides is unclear, particularly for oral formulations. Oral aminoglycosides are poorly absorbed in the gastrointestinal tract and are largely excreted in feces, minimizing systemic exposure.

## **DISCUSSION**

The risks associated with veterinary drug residues, particularly aminoglycosides, highlight the importance of scientifically justified withdrawal periods. Current guidelines may not fully account for the poor oral absorption and minimal systemic exposure of aminoglycosides, necessitating further research into their pharmacokinetics and residue persistence. Optimizing withdrawal times will ensure food safety while minimizing unnecessary restrictions on the food production industry.

The following sections provide an in-depth discussion of the pharmacokinetics, untoward effects, regulatory guidelines, and the implications for food safety. The risk of aminoglycoside residues in edible tissues primarily relates to injectable forms, where these drugs are absorbed into the bloodstream and distributed throughout the animal's body (Adeniyi Adefegha, 2019).

### ***Pharmacokinetics of Oral Aminoglycosides in human***

Being highly polar cations, aminoglycosides are known for their poor absorption from the gastrointestinal tract resulting to a very low bioavailability. These drugs remain intact in the intestine and are excreted in the feces. This means that when oral aminoglycosides are administered or residues taken by food, the majority of the drug stays in the gastrointestinal tract, where it exerts its effects locally, often in the intestinal canal. Only a small fraction of the drug enters systemic circulation, significantly reducing the potential for accumulation in tissues that they may produce adverse effects.

### ***Untoward Effects***

Aminoglycosides, especially in elderly, can cause toxicity via prolonged exposure at high concentrations in specific organs due to their accumulation in cellular compartments like lysosomes or binding to critical cellular structures (Paterson et al., 1998).

**Ototoxicity:** Several drugs including aminoglycosides have ototoxic potential (Tanin., 2024). Accumulation of aminoglycosides in the perilymph and endolymph of the inner ear may cause hearing and balance damage (Hutchin & Cortopassi., 1994). Drug interaction with cochlear (Jiang et al., 2017) and vestibular sensory hair cells, may lead to disrupting ionic balance and leading to cellular degeneration (Rogers & Petersen., 2011). Formation of an iron-aminoglycoside complex promotes reactive oxygen species (ROS) production (Zhang et al., 2021), causing oxidative stress and permanent damage to sensory hair cells and auditory neurons (Zhang et al., 2021). Cochlear toxicity may lead to high-frequency hearing loss, tinnitus and eventual progression to lower frequencies (Skarzynska et al., 2020). Vestibular toxicity can cause vertigo, nausea, ataxia, chronic labyrinthitis and difficulty coordinating movements (Edlow & Newman-Toker, 2015). Damage is largely irreversible as cochlear and vestibular hair cells cannot regenerate (Zheng & Zuo., 2017).

Ototoxicity requires the systemic distribution of aminoglycosides, where the drug accumulates in the inner ear fluids (perilymph and endolymph) and induces oxidative damage to sensory cells (Jiang et al., 2017). Without systemic absorption, aminoglycosides cannot reach inner ear tissues, thus ototoxicity will not manifest (Rivetti et al., 2023).

This minimal systemic absorption means that oral aminoglycosides are unlikely to reach levels in bloodstream that would pose a significant risk and suggests that the withdrawal times for these formulations may be excessively long, as their pharmacokinetics do not support the same concerns over residue accumulation with other antibiotics (Lees & Toutain, 2012).

**Nephrotoxicity:** Uptake and retention of aminoglycosides in proximal tubular cells through megalin-mediated endocytosis in the renal cortex may cause nephrotoxicity (Nagai et al., 2025). Aminoglycoside Interference with lysosomal function, mitochondrial activity, and phospholipid metabolism, leads to tubular cell damage and induces brush border enzymuria, proteinuria, and impaired tubular concentrating ability (Kaloyanides & Pastoriza-munoz, 1980).

Affected proximal tubules of nephrons cause gradual rise in serum creatinine levels, proteinuria, non-oliguric renal insufficiency (Dobrek, 2023). It rarely progresses to severe tubular necrosis; typically reversible due to tubular cell regeneration (Mattie et al., 1989).

Nephrotoxicity depends on systemic aminoglycosides accumulating in the renal proximal tubular cells, where they cause mitochondrial and lysosomal damage (Humes., 1988). Ingested drug residue remain confined to the gastrointestinal (GI) tract and do not reach the kidneys, so eliminating the risk of nephrotoxicity.

**Neuromuscular blockade:** Inhibition of acetylcholine release from presynaptic nerve terminals may lead to reduction of postsynaptic acetylcholine receptor sensitivity at the neuromuscular junction and respiratory paralysis (Humes, 1988). This effect involves inhibition of acetylcholine release and postsynaptic receptor sensitivity at the neuromuscular junction, which depends on systemic availability of aminoglycosides (Krenn et al., 2020). Lack of systemic absorption precludes the drug from affecting neuromuscular function, preventing this rare but severe effect.

**Antimicrobial resistance:** Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) refers to the ability of microorganisms, such as bacteria, viruses, fungi, or parasites, to resist the effects of drugs that once killed them or inhibited their growth (Abushaheen et al., 2020). Aminoglycosides play a significant role in the development of AMR within both Veterinary (Caneschi et al., 2023) and human medicine (Brinkac et al., 2017). Their use, particularly in food-producing animals, contributes to resistance that can affect enteric flora (intestinal microbiota) in humans (Jaimee & Halami, 2016).

**Other Effects:** Aminoglycoside caused hypersensitivity is rare and likely mediated by immune responses to drug or impurities in formulations (Childs-Kean et al., 2019). Rash, fever and anaphylaxis may occur. Hypersensitivity reactions occur when aminoglycosides act as antigens in systemic circulation, provoking an immune response (Sánchez-borges et al., 2013). In order to produce an effect, drugs, including aminoglycosides, must be absorbed from the gastrointestinal tract and reach the site of action. Since residues do not cross the GI barrier, they do not enter the circulation and therefore cannot trigger immune-mediated reactions (Ma et al., 2018).

Residues in the GI tract primarily act locally without penetrating systemic circulation. The GI environment limits their interaction with sensitive tissues like the ear, kidney, or neuromuscular systems. Residues are either degraded in the digestive system or eliminated in feces, preventing systemic exposure and subsequent untoward effects. This explains why aminoglycoside residues in food pose no clinical risk to humans when ingested, as systemic absorption, a prerequisite for their toxic effects, which is absent in this case.

### ***Regulatory Guidelines and Withdrawal Times***

Agencies such as the FDA and EMA establish strict maximum residue limits (MRLs) and mandatory withdrawal periods for aminoglycoside-containing animal products (Zad et al.,



2023). These requirements are intended to minimize public health risks but do not account for the negligible human systemic exposure following oral ingestion (WHO, 2015).

Regulatory guidelines primarily focus on safeguarding consumers from potential drug residues in food products, assuming systemic absorption and risk of toxicity (Sundram et al., 2024). In these guidelines and several studies, the poor absorption of aminoglycosides in humans is often overlooked, leading to unnecessarily recommendations on their use in animals (Mesfin et al., 2024).

Given the emerging evidence on the minimal absorption of oral aminoglycosides (Jana & Deb, 2006), it is crucial for regulatory bodies to reevaluate the current withdrawal times for these drugs. Specifically, withdrawal times should be shortened or eliminated. Reevaluation should be guided based on evidence-based pharmacokinetic data.

Risk associated with residues of non-absorbed antibiotics like aminoglycosides are very low than absorbed antibiotics (Table 3). This is because they largely remain confined to the GI tract and do not contribute to systemic exposure or adverse effects in humans. However, their localized effects on the gut microbiota still necessitate proper regulatory oversight to ensure food safety.

Any adverse effects of aminoglycoside residues would most likely occur locally in the GI tract, potentially altering gut flora. However, these effects are often negligible at residue levels found in food.

While aminoglycosides generally pose a lower risk due to their lack of absorption, it is still critical to monitor and regulate residues. High concentrations of aminoglycoside residues in the gut might influence gut microbiota, contributing to localized resistance or minor GI disturbances. Regulatory standards (MRLs) help ensure that residue levels in food are low enough to prevent even minor risks.

**Table 3.** Risk stratification through comparing systemically administered aminoglycosides and orally ingested residues from animal-origin food.

Factor	Systemically Administered Aminoglycosides	Oral Ingestion of Residues in Food of Animal Origin
<b>Absorption</b>	Fully absorbed into the bloodstream via intravenous or intramuscular routes, leading to systemic distribution.	Minimal or no absorption from the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, as residues do not enter systemic circulation.
<b>Risk of Ototoxicity</b>	High—Aminoglycosides accumulate in ear fluids (perilymph and endolymph), causing cochlear (auditory) and vestibular (balance) damage (Jiang et al., 2017).	Very low or none—Residues that do not enter systemic circulation cannot reach the inner ear tissues, preventing ototoxicity.
<b>Risk of Nephrotoxicity</b>	High—Accumulation in renal cells causes cellular damage, leading to renal impairment, which is dose- and duration-dependent (Lopez-Novoa et al., 2011).	Very low or none—Since there is no systemic absorption, residues in the GI tract do not accumulate in the kidneys.

<b>Risk of Neuromuscular Blockade</b>	Moderate—Aminoglycosides can interfere with neuromuscular transmission, causing a curare-like blockade, especially in patients with conditions like myasthenia gravis (Krenn et al., 2020).	Very low or none—Absence of systemic absorption means no neuromuscular blockade.
<b>Risk of Hypersensitivity</b>	Low to moderate—Potential for allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis and rash, as the drug is systemically available (Dragostin et al., 2022).	Very low or none—Due to limited systemic absorption, immune responses are unlikely to be triggered by residues.

## CONCLUSION

Systemically administered aminoglycosides pose significant risks of ototoxicity, nephrotoxicity, neuromuscular blockade, and hypersensitivity due to their complete absorption into systemic circulation. These risks are highly dose- and duration-dependent, particularly in vulnerable populations such as the elderly or those with renal impairment. On the other hand, the ingestion of aminoglycoside residues from animal-derived food products is generally safe, with negligible risk, as these residues are not absorbed through the gastrointestinal tract. Consequently, they do not enter systemic circulation and are unlikely to cause adverse effects typically associated with aminoglycoside toxicity. The primary concern regarding these residues is their potential contribution to the development of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in human enteric flora. Current withdrawal times for oral aminoglycosides may not be justified, given the limited systemic absorption of these drugs. Pharmacokinetic evidence suggests that oral aminoglycosides are poorly absorbed in the gastrointestinal tract, further reducing the likelihood of drug residues in edible tissues.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Regulatory agencies should consider reassessing withdrawal guidelines, particularly for oral formulations, to align with these scientific findings. Further research into the pharmacokinetics and residue persistence of oral aminoglycosides in food-producing animals is essential for optimizing withdrawal guidelines and ensuring food safety. The ultimate goal is to safeguard food safety without imposing unnecessary withdrawal periods, which could adversely affect both the food production industry and public health. Additionally, to strengthen the scientific basis for withdrawal times in veterinary medicine, there is a clear need to evaluate the impact of low-dose aminoglycoside exposure on the development of antimicrobial resistance in food systems.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author(s) claimed no conflict of interest.

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