

Speech to the Annual BVA Annual Scottish Dinner

Anna Judson, President of the British Veterinary Association

Wednesday 8 May 2024 at the Scottish Parliament

Thank you so much, Gareth. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the British Veterinary Association's annual Scottish dinner. Thank you so much for joining us.

It is an absolute pleasure to be here in Edinburgh this week. Scotland is a beautiful country and I've had a number of memorable trips here, including a visit to the stunning Trossachs National Park. I can't wait to go back again.

Thank you to Edward Mountain MSP for hosting us this evening. Edward has, for many years, been one of BVA's Honorary Members, and we truly value his ongoing support of our profession. Thank you.

We're delighted that Jim Fairlie MSP, Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity is able to join us this evening as our guest speaker and we look forward to hearing from him shortly.

The last few years have presented challenges for everyone, however veterinary teams have needed to find new levels of resilience in the last 18 months to navigate a wave of ongoing challenges.

Avian flu remains a significant threat with Defra closely monitoring new strains and the risks posed by wider transmission; farm vets are bracing for a spike in cases of Bluetongue virus 3; the impacts of the Westminster Government's decision to ban XL Bully type dogs continues to be felt in practice; and the Competition and Markets Authority review and subsequent proposed Market Investigation into veterinary services for household pets is placing vet teams under intense pressure.

Tonight, I will talk in more detail about both the Competition and Markets Authority review and the XL Bully ban and the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

I will also talk about the urgent need for reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, to create legislation which is fit for purpose and enables the veterinary professions to thrive in the face of such challenges.

As many of you know, at the end of 2023, the Competition and Markets Authority launched a review into the UK veterinary services market for pets. Its initial findings led to a proposal to undertake a Market Investigation Reference, and BVA responded to that consultation jointly with the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons, the British Veterinary Nursing Association, and the Veterinary Management Group.

We're keen to see healthy competition and informed consumer choice within the veterinary services market and this external scrutiny is a welcome opportunity to reflect and ensure we're continuing to deliver the best possible service for both patients and clients. However, we are also acutely aware of the impact the CMA review is having on the profession. Inaccurate and unfair media reporting, characterising vets as scammers who are preying on pet owners' desire to do the very best for their animals, is leading to many veterinary teams reporting increased levels of abusive behaviour from clients, both in person and online.

Of course, this portrayal of vets simply isn't true and as a practising vet of more than 30 years, who knows first-hand the quality of care which vet teams deliver day in, day out, it's painful to see our profession misrepresented in this way. I'm pleased to be able to stand here and tell you that BVA is tackling this issue head on, both with the media and by ensuring the veterinary profession's perspective is fully heard and understood by the CMA.

While the CMA scrutiny brings with it many challenges, it also presents opportunities. It's important that as a profession we reflect on how we got to this juncture and what we can do together to rebuild the trust between us and our clients, and BVA will be leading these efforts.

We have developed guidance for our members and the wider veterinary profession on how practices can be more transparent in relation to vet fees and practice ownership, improving how we explain prescribing and dispensing options for veterinary medicines, and ensuring we explain the different treatment options which take into account the full range of clients' circumstances, what we know as vets as providing 'contextualised care'. It's a positive step that will help move the profession forward.

One area in which we fully agree with the CMA is around its concerns about the outdated regulatory framework which is no longer fit for purpose. Alongside the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, we have been lobbying for reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 for some time and have secured cross-party support in Parliament. It is our hope that the CMA's investigation will be the catalyst for much needed reform.

We cannot build a modern and effective veterinary profession on the foundations of legislation which was created in a very different era. The current Veterinary Surgeons Act fails to embrace the potential of the wider veterinary team. We do not work in isolation as vets, we are closely supported by others – such as veterinary nurses, vet techs, musculoskeletal professionals and equine dental technicians, yet these important roles are not recognised.

The legislation fails to offer any legal protection for the title of veterinary nurse. Highly skilled and qualified, registered veterinary nurses work closely with veterinary surgeons, yet no formal training or qualifications are actually *required* for someone to call themselves a 'veterinary nurse'. Anyone of you can call yourselves that. So this must be rectified. As must the Act's failure to regulate veterinary practices, meaning that individual vets and veterinary nurses are held accountable for business decisions which can directly impact on animal health and welfare. This is simply not appropriate.

So, 'A profession for everyone' is my presidential theme. For me, this includes supporting the wider teams we lead as vets, and we ask for your support to help us

lobby all political parties to keep this issue on the agenda and ensure this much needed UK-wide legislative change happens.

Another piece of legislation which is not fit for purpose and has just been mentioned and requires urgent reform is the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

Since the introduction of the Act, dog bite incidents have steadily risen, with hospital admissions increasing from around 3,000 to nearly 9,000 in 2021-22, that's a three-fold increase. Adding more breeds, such as the XL Bully type, to the banned breeds list will not solve the serious and distressing issue of increasing dog bite incidents and dreadful fatalities. Along with other members of the Dog Control Coalition, we believe that the only way to protect public safety is by overhauling the Act.

Since the bans on XL Bully type dogs were announced in England and Wales we have engaged constructively with Defra to ensure the veterinary perspective is taken into account. More recently the Scottish government has also announced a ban on this type of dog and we have welcomed the opportunity to work closely with government as the details of the ban have been developed.

Mindful of both veterinary capacity and the growing body of scientific evidence which suggests that neutering large breeds early risks the development of orthopaedic problems, alongside other medical and behavioural conditions, we have secured extended neutering deadlines in England and Wales, and ensured a longer period of time for neutering, recognising age specific requirements, in Scotland. This will not only ensure the health and welfare of these dogs, it will also enable the veterinary profession to have the capacity to manage the anticipated increase in these large dogs requiring the procedure.

Alongside our work to support the veterinary profession through these bans, we are continuing to press the UK Governments, in Scotland working alongside MSPs, for a complete overhaul of the dangerous dogs legislation, which has consistently failed to protect people since its introduction. Breed specific legislation as enshrined in the

Dangerous Dogs Act is ineffective and hard to enforce. It must be replaced with breed neutral legislation which deals with aggression in all dogs, and has responsible dog ownership and training at its core. Only then can we properly protect the public.

So, please help us:

During the evening we would like to hear your thoughts on how we can best support you and collaborate to bring about change in these important areas.

- Reform of the outdated Veterinary Surgeons Act is essential for the future of our profession. We urge you to support our lobbying and would welcome conversations about how this can be achieved.
- Banning individual dog breeds will not protect public safety in the long term. Please help us to press the UK Government for reform of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

Finally, I would like to say thank you to all my colleagues, many of you who are in this room, who are part of BVA Scottish Branch. Your energy, commitment and expertise are hugely valued. They are a great support to us in the London team, thank you.

If everyone would please rise and raise your glasses to a toast, to “BVA Scottish Branch and to Scotland’s veterinary community”. Thank you.

Thank you very much and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening. I will now hand over to Jim Fairlie MSP, Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity.