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BVA

NEWS RELEASE

BVA ANNUAL WELSH DINNER

CARDIFF – 15 MAY 2002

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

1. Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening and a formal welcome to BVA's annual Welsh dinner ... [aside regarding rugby]
2. Sometimes we think that the profession might be closed down. The latest foray comes from the Competition Commission, the born-again Monopolies and Mergers Commission. They are investigating whether a monopoly exists in the supply of veterinary prescription only medicines for the treatment of animals. We recently had a thirty odd page document listing Jeremy Paxman type statements which left us feeling we should be locked up and the key thrown away.
3. I see in yesterday's Times the bank chief executives had a real go at the Treasury Select Committee disputing the findings of the last Competition Commission report alleging bank profits were too high. We do move in high circles.
4. It is not my intention to go into the detail of the investigation as to whether any form of monopoly exists still less give you a lecture on costs, charges and profits but it does seem a bit of an overkill when you

consider the size of our businesses stretched as they are across the UK. Put roughly there are about 9000 practitioners working in about 3000 practices. Competition can be cut throat.

5. My point to make tonight is, with no disrespect to the Commission whatsoever, is that in this country we can seemingly afford the luxury of a detailed and costly diversion away from producing, competing and beating real rivals who would take our UK markets at the drop of a hat. A black market in medicines bears testimony to that.
6. Just before moving on Denise Kingsmill, Chairman of the medicines investigation said on the Today Programme that their inquiry had raised a bigger public response than any other study they had done. We find that extraordinary.
7. It seems that the media hype about vets and all these TV vet programmes have consumed all our interests. Even the government in its consultation mode seems to feel that parrots, stick insects, fish and gerbils should have rights beyond human beings and that anticipation of cruelty is a basis for litigation. If that were applied to the English rugby team and what they did to their Welsh friends they would be in court!
8. It was Eifion Evans that started an altercation within the profession when he calmly announced to the media a while ago that there were too many fluffy vets. The fluffies were ruffled and off we went again. So much for media interest in sideshows. I turn to more serious matters.
9. Last week we gave evidence to the FMD Lessons Learned Inquiry chaired by Ian Anderson. Prior to that we have been to the European

Parliament, given evidence to their FMD committee and before that submitted evidence to the Royal Society Inquiry on Infectious Diseases. In BVA we spend as much time on Inquiries at present as helping to cope with the outbreak in the first place.

10. To be fair with well over £2bn spent on the whole affair on: compensation for farmers, cost of materials including cleansing and disinfection, salaries and wages for those involved, the public is more than entitled to ask questions.
11. European taxpayers also have an interest since more than 50% of the cost will come from the European purse. There were 600,000 cattle, 3.3m sheep and 140,000 pigs slaughtered from nearly 10,000 affected premises. Fees for valuers and slaughtermen came to £25m and vets cost £15m. It is not yet widely known but by the time FMD had been confirmed and the source found in Northumberland there were already 57 outbreaks stretching from Dumfries to Devon.
12. Control plans for FMD fall into four phases. First the monitoring and checks on imports, second spotting the disease when it occurs, third catching up on the rate of spread of the disease and fourth eradicating it as quickly as possible. By some amazing coincidence the 1967/68 outbreak lasted exactly the same length of time as the 2001 outbreak.
13. In spite of the fact that the outbreak was far in excess of plans to deal with such an event it took one month to start to reduce the rate of increase and get on top of the disease. What is of concern is the failure to eradicate the length and size of the tail of the outbreak for a variety of reasons, the most significant being the lack of biosecurity on farms by

farmers and countryside business and activity. Infection was spread by air, by animals, by people, by vehicles and by materials.

14. When the vet diagnoses F&M he has to “go clean”; clothes removed, disinfected etc. Not so the water board contractors working on a farm infected and working the next day miles away close to different animals not yet affected. I will come back to real control shortly through controlling movement. But first I would like to make the point that some fundamental policy thinking is needed. We have seen some reports from USA that show the capital value of livestock and also show that there is a virtual total lack of any private insurance to protect owners from disease or much else. It is staggering to think we can take such risks. Yet to date it is taken for granted.
15. We have kept in touch with vets and farmers on the ground. There is immense frustration and anger in Cumbria at the seemingly obvious lack of capacity to have dealt with the situation. Compensation has helped of course but many farmers and vets were brought to their knees in the process.
16. Who is to blame for lack of preparedness? That’s a central question. Government as a whole has to allocate resources as best it can. Can it do better? It seems crazy to the veterinary profession that we push and push in the UK for new legislation and consistently fail to enforce what we already have.
17. I said earlier that we had given evidence to the Lessons Learned Inquiry. We said a great deal in written evidence but have to find concise words in

oral session. You may be interested to hear some of our top ten points. We will see what the inquiry makes of them.

- lack of preparedness within the profession to act swiftly and decisively in the early stages of the outbreak has to be remedied and resourced through peacetime “commitments and contracts”;
- the profession in the field and at a national level has experienced lack of “joined up government” through different departments, agencies and local authorities to the detriment of national disease control;
- the key to controlling the spread of disease is to control movement of animals, vehicles, materials and people from affected premises;
- the farm is the weakest link in the food chain in terms of strictness of control measures. The BVA would wish to work with the Food Standards Agency to bring national guidance on farm livestock standards into the public arena to instill consumer confidence; and
- national farm standards that are complied with through farm assurance schemes should enable private insurance to be available at economic cost thus sharing the cost of disease control more equitably with the State.

18. FMD is an unguided missile for farm animal production and hence food. We vets have to take a wider interest in the future of farming and so Sir Don Curry’s report published earlier this year is very important to us as well. He made a number of recommendations and implored Government not to “cherry pick”. But they will and, I suppose, we all will!

19. The report does lay down some key base points for future policy and I quote four:

- a national animal health strategy, (which doesn't exist);
- regulation should move towards a whole farm approach including environmental considerations, (which we haven't got);
- whole farm audits and plans should be developed, (to look to the future);
and
- current farm and food assurance schemes should be rationalized, (because there are too many).

20. These recommendations amount to “get your house in order and in the process look at things in a wider, better and simpler context”. These recommendations from our point of view can be applied to a logical cascade which is:

- a national animal health strategy;
- setting of whole farm standards incorporating animal health;
- rationalizing commercial farm assurance schemes under whole farm standards;
- creation of private insurance facilities for farmers; and

- carrying out whole farm audits.
21. Mind you we still have to be careful to avoid the “smother” factor starting all over again. This need not be so and we are currently looking at a better public/private partnership for vets doing public work. We need to show in a clear, concise and acceptable way how controls from food into animals to food for people works right along the food chain.
 22. There are many economists who argue for imported food full stop. But when we look at our capacity in the UK to produce food and I look at the tenacity of smaller countries like the Republic of Ireland and Denmark to stick at it I get the strong feeling we are again diverting ourselves at our long term expense. It’s time to stop it.
 23. Ladies and gentlemen I could go on and talk about pet travel abroad, antibiotic resistance, veterinary education, animal welfare proposals, TB in cattle and badgers and all the rest but it’s time for me to stop it.
 24. Ladies and gentlemen I hope you have enjoyed the evening. It is a pleasure for us to meet with you all and I would like to propose a toast to our guests. However, on this occasion would you all please join me in a common toast and that is “looking forward”.