

## Speech to the BVA annual London Dinner

Professor Bill Reilly, President of the British Veterinary Association

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~ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~

Minister, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to welcome you all here tonight to this British Veterinary Association London dinner. First of all I would like to thank the Minister, the Right Honourable Lord Davies of Oldham, and his wife for joining us. We are very grateful to have you here and look forward to hearing the views of the Government on a number of crucial issues.

If any of you have been keeping an eye on my previous speeches and press statements, you'll know that the theme for my presidential year is 'vets and the public good'; indeed it will also be the theme of our annual Congress, which will be held in Glasgow in September. I chose this theme primarily because I spent the vast majority of my own veterinary career in public health and so it is a subject that is close to my heart. It is also one that I fear is overlooked: by our clients, by the public at large, and – perhaps most worryingly – by the Government.

Public good takes many guises from contributing to food security to ensuring the health of all our pets. All of which contribute to human health and are part of the concept of 'One Medicine' that is very much to the fore. I would like to say a little about some of these roles.

I must say Minister that, by and large, the BVA enjoys an excellent relationship with Defra – we are regularly consulted on key legislation and policy decisions; we are often invited to take part in stakeholder groups and forums; and we have a clear link through the Chief Veterinary Officer. And yet, despite this relationship, I am concerned that vets are not afforded the recognition that I believe we deserve by Government.

Those of you who read the veterinary press will be aware of the current dispute between the BVA and Animal Health over fees for Official Veterinarians (OVs) – private practice vets who undertake work on behalf of the Government, such as TB testing, vaccinating, and on-farm work in the event of a notifiable disease outbreak. When Foot and Mouth struck, OVs were the backbone of the country's response. We play a vital role on the frontline of disease surveillance and control and in safeguarding the farming industry, food production and public health. But most OVs will tell you that their work is largely thankless.

We have long argued that OVs should be paid a professional fee for their work. Over the past few years the BVA has been negotiating to secure remuneration that reflects the time and skill involved. We were deeply disappointed by the proposal from Animal Health when, despite the considerable effort on both sides to research appropriate rates, they suddenly put forward a pay scheme which took no account of the professional service delivered. Can you imagine the response to such an approach to our medical colleagues?

In December we reached an impasse and the BVA could not endorse Animal Health's proposal. Let me make it clear that we have not walked away from further negotiations, but we have taken a strong stand on behalf of the profession. Minister, we understand that budgets are tight across the board, but the Government needs OVs and needs to pay them an appropriate professional fee for a professional service while at the same time looking to deliver these services in the most efficient and cost-effective way.

The daily fight against bovine tuberculosis simply could not take place without OVs, since currently this is the area of greatest OV involvement. We must recognise the disaster this disease is to the farming community and to society as a whole. A cost of almost £110 million last year, 30,000 cattle slaughtered and 5,000 herds under restriction. This cannot go on.

Since becoming BVA President I have cited control of TB as a useful example of devolution in action – with each nation taking a different approach. As a Glasgow boy, I'm delighted that Scotland has achieved Official TB-Free Status, but as a UK vet and President of a national organisation I am frustrated that Scotland's success can't be enjoyed by the rest of the country.

In Wales, the bold TB eradication policy – led by Rural Affairs Minister Elin Jones and Chief Veterinary Officer Christianne Glossop – has brought both cheers and condemnation for its inclusion of a targeted badger cull. It's a highly emotive and divisive policy area but it's one where vets have led the call for action on all fronts to tackle the spread of disease in both wildlife and livestock species.

The BVA continues to applaud the decision of the Welsh Assembly Government to proceed with such a controversial policy because we believe that only by addressing cattle and wildlife simultaneously will we start to get on top of TB. There are clear animal welfare, public health and economic reasons for stronger measures.

Minister, I would strongly urge you and your colleagues not to use the recent controversial Jenkins report to justify the current position against culling of badgers in England. The report analysed data from a very specific set of circumstances used in the Randomised Badger Culling Trial; circumstances that would not be repeated in a future cull.

What we should take from the report is that the culling of badgers does reduce the incidence of TB in cattle and any future cull must ensure further control measures are in place at the end of the cull to stop the disease returning. We need to learn from the science, not use it to take a backwards step.

Thankfully, improved dialogue between vets, farmers and the Government is on the agenda with the recent publication of the draft Animal Health Bill – a result of the Government's consultations on responsibility and cost sharing, although the timing is somewhat mindboggling. The BVA's response was mixed. I sit on the Responsibility and Cost Sharing Advisory Group chaired by Rosemary Radcliffe but I am speaking to you tonight as President of the BVA. That said, my views in both capacities are pretty much identical.

The principle of responsibility and cost sharing is welcome, particularly if it achieves better health and welfare through incentivising good practice and penalising bad. But we remain unconvinced of the need for the proposed non-departmental public body to make and implement animal health policy, and its aims at this stage are unclear.

While we're delighted that the Government listened to our call to separate the English and UK roles of the CVO, the profession was yet again frustrated to hear that animal health policy and animal welfare policy are still due to be split under the proposed arrangements, with Defra ministers retaining responsibility for welfare.

This is despite strong opposition from all those with an interest in animal health and welfare and makes a nonsense of the consultation process. Health and welfare are inextricably linked and cannot be split without detriment to both.

The BVA is also keen to see better defined roles for the key players in a disease outbreak situation. It is crucial that we get this element right – timing and strong leadership are paramount when disease strikes.

Coming back to my theme of vets and the public good – another aspect is the veterinary profession's role in the promotion of high standards of animal welfare. In the UK we enjoy some of the highest standards in the world, but that should not allow us to become complacent.

At any one time the BVA's Ethics and Welfare Group is tackling a wide range of issues, across many species. Our aim is to identify potential welfare problems before they become endemic and to input into policy solutions to reduce the harm caused to animals.

Vets enjoy close relationships with their clients – whether that's farmers, breeders, or individual pet owners – but sometimes our message to them is a tough one.

It is something that the BVA has not shied away from and recently we published a policy statement instructing vets and farmers to take an active role in improving dairy cow welfare. While there has been progress made by the industry, we remain concerned about a number of issues such as lameness, mastitis, the quality of housing, the longevity of the animals and the welfare implications of infectious diseases.

Understandably, farmers fear that the higher costs involved in measures to improve welfare will not be met by the consumer. This is where vets have a key role in finding pro-welfare measures that can increase productivity and quality, which leads, in turn, to increased income for the farmer.

The good news is that a study carried out in 2007 to look at public opinion on UK milk marketing and dairy cow welfare found that 93% of the public would pay more for good dairy welfare. This is why we believe welfare labelling is so crucial. Half of the respondents in this study felt they were poorly informed about food production. If we want people to understand what they are eating and care about the choices they make in the supermarket, they must be better educated. We have seen through the growth of the free range egg market and the more recent trends towards local sourcing that consumers do respond to information provided on packaging. This is an issue that we are pursuing in Europe and we would appreciate your support – both as consumers and as people with a voice on animal welfare issues.

Consumer education may also prove to be the key element in tackling the health and welfare problems in dogs. Although it caused a huge amount of controversy, the TV programme Pedigree Dogs Exposed turned out to be an important catalyst in changing the way we think about the breeding and selling of dogs.

Here, the veterinary profession has a major role to play, and this was writ large in the recent reports by the Associate Parliamentary Group on Animal Welfare (APGAW) and Professor Bateson. I'm

pleased to report that we're already making progress. Last year the BVA's charity, the Animal Welfare Foundation, set up the Dog Breeding Stakeholder Group bringing together vets, the Kennel Club and the welfare charities to come up with practical ways to secure the future health and welfare of puppies. The Group has already published guidance for people wanting to purchase a dog and is currently looking at puppy contracts. We will continue to work with stakeholders to implement the recommendations of APGAW and Bateson.

Our key message to the public is 'talk to a vet before you choose your pet'. Only by understanding what to look for will potential owners be able to make the right choice for themselves and the animal.

It's going to take a lot of time and co-operation between the welfare charities, vets, breeders, the Kennel Club, and the general public, but I believe that we all want to get to the point where irresponsible breeding is neither tolerated nor financially viable and all dogs can enjoy happy and healthy lives.

Another companion animal topic I'd like to touch on is pet travel – highly political because of its consumer angle and the threat it poses to public health. You will be aware that the UK currently imposes stricter measures on the non-commercial movement of pets than the rest of Europe, along with four other Member States. This derogation from full harmonisation with the rest of the EU, primarily to prevent rabies, also protects us from ticks and tapeworms, which are potentially dangerous to both animals and humans.

Whilst we respect that the ultimate aim is for all Member States to have the same entry requirements, the veterinary profession has raised a number of concerns with Defra and MEPs that the science does not yet support the case for harmonisation. I am delighted to say that on this issue the veterinary profession has enjoyed an excellent relationship with Defra and I would like to thank you, Minister, for the time your Department has afforded the BVA to set out our concerns.

We await the outcome of the discussions in the European Parliament and will continue to push for further research to help us protect the UK from these parasites.

The General Election looms but we are not yet in Purdah so I'd like to finish with a policy suggestion that ticks all the boxes. It's tough on antisocial behaviour and crime, it's strong on animal welfare, and the icing on the cake is that it could save the public purse a lot of money. It's what you might call a no-brainer, but for some reason Westminster politicians have yet to see it.

It is of course repeal and reform of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

I have heard on several occasions that this piece of legislation is regularly cited in political studies classes as one of the worst drafted, and it is easy to see why. The Act bans four types of dog; the most relevant for the UK is the "pit bull type". This is not a recognised breed and there is no description in the Act meaning that identification of a pit bull type is extremely difficult. The result is thousands of dogs that have shown no aggression being locked up in police kennels until their owners can prove they are not 'of the type'.

This process is distressing for owners (particularly law-abiding, responsible owners), detrimental to the welfare of the animal, and expensive. Meanwhile, there are dogs not on the banned list that have committed horrendous acts resulting in serious injury and even death.

The problems caused by dangerous dogs will never be solved until dog owners appreciate that they are responsible for the actions of their animals. Rather than singling out individual breeds the BVA

strongly believes in targeting individual aggressive dogs – the principle widely known as deed not breed.

Last week this principle scored a victory in Scotland when the Control of Dogs Bill passed its first stage in Holyrood. The private member's bill, proposed by MSP Christine Grahame, recognises that all dogs can show aggression and affords councils the powers to place tighter controls on these dogs and their owners.

It isn't perfect – Section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act, which includes the ban on certain types, still remains. But it is a step in the right direction because member after member – representing all political parties – stood up in the debate to support deed not breed.

As part of the Dangerous Dogs Act Study Group, the BVA, Kennel Club, Dogs Trust and others, worked with Christine Grahame to promote this legislation in the Scottish Parliament. And together we have been lobbying for new legislation in Westminster. With concern about weapon dogs rising and a new Parliament on the horizon looking for fresh ideas, the time is surely right for it to be at the top of the political agenda.

Minister, I'll leave that one with you.

Finally, I'd like to thank you all again for coming this evening to learn more about some of the issues of concern and interest to the veterinary profession. I can assure you there are far more topics that we are dealing with on a daily basis but I hope I have given you an insight into our broad agenda.

I would now like to welcome Lord Davies, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defra, who has very kindly agreed to respond on behalf of our guests and give us the Government's perspective on some of these major topics.