Speech to the BVA annual Welsh Dinner
Robin Hargreaves, President of the British Veterinary Association
Tuesday 1 July 2014 at City Hall, Cardiff

~ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~

Ladies and gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here this evening to Cardiff City Hall to the British Veterinary Association annual Welsh dinner.

It’s wonderful to be back in Cardiff. This is my fourth visit to the city as a BVA officer and the last time I was here – in this building – I was surrounded by friends and family to be inaugurated as BVA President. So the city holds a lot of great memories for me.

Which provides some comfort and compensation for the last time I visited Cardiff in a non-BVA capacity with the other passion in my life, and saw England unceremoniously beaten by Wales at the Millennium Stadium.

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But I’m genuinely delighted to be able to address you this evening in what I have recently discovered is the UN International Year of Family Farming. Growing up on a tenanted hill farm in Yorkshire I know my family shared many of the same challenges, highs and lows faced by farmers here in Wales.

And our guest speaker tonight, Llyr Gruffydd, is no stranger to life on a family farm. Llyr is an Assembly Member for the North Wales region and became an honorary associate member of the BVA in 2011. He has become a true champion for the veterinary profession in Wales and for our Association.

Llyr is currently the Shadow Minister for Sustainable Communities, Energy and Food and we very much look forward to hearing his perspective on some of the key issues of importance to the veterinary profession in Wales.
The theme for my presidential year is trust, and the relationships that exist between veterinary surgeons and our clients, our stakeholders, and the general public.

On many of the issues I’d like to raise tonight, trust is an essential component.

**AHW FRAMEWORK**

Last month Welsh Government announced the new Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group bringing together a small group of experts, under the chairmanship of Peredur Hughes, to advise on a whole host of animal health and welfare issues in farm and companion animals under the new framework.

One of the first priorities for the Group will be to begin building trust with industry and veterinary stakeholders. That is why we were absolutely delighted to see the appointment of two veterinary surgeons to the Group – Professor Jo Price of Bristol Vet School, and BVA regional representative and Swansea practitioner Ifan Lloyd. And Jo and Ifan will of course work alongside Chief Veterinary Officer Christianne Glossop and her team.

We very much appreciate the recognition of the importance of veterinary input into a group tasked with shaping animal health and welfare for the next ten years; having practising vets influencing policy is truly brilliant for Welsh agriculture and the wellbeing of all animals under our care.

**BOVINE TB**

Like the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy Steering Group before it, the Framework Group will very quickly need to get to grips with the major disease priorities for Wales. And none is more pressing than bovine TB.

Before getting into such a contentious issue I’d like to say congratulations to Welsh Government, our specialist division the British Cattle Veterinary Association, AHVLA, and Defra, for the incredibly successful delivery of the 6th International Conference on *Mycobacterium bovis* held in this very building in June.

For the first time the conference programme addressed some of the complexities around social factors and attitudes to disease control and eradication, alongside the scientific papers.

It is a significant feather in Wales’s cap to host to such an important global conference and all the feedback we have heard has been excellent.

It is important that we keep learning from the experiences of other countries, and here in the British Isles we have four different approaches to bovine TB eradication to compare.

BVA maintains that we will never achieve disease eradication in the high incidence areas without utilising all of the available tools, including the targeted, managed and humane culling of badgers.
Lessons must now be learned from the two pilots culls in England and we currently await Defra’s detailed response to the recommendations of the Independent Expert Panel. But, if it can be delivered humanely and effectively, we know that the science supports a better outcome for the disease situation in cattle.

In Wales, news of significant reductions in new herd incidents and in the number of cattle slaughtered across the country is very welcome, and it is testament to the work being done by Christianne and her team, in partnership with industry and the veterinary profession, to tighten cattle control measures.

And I’d like to take this moment to pay tribute to former BVA President Bob Stevenson who has very recently stood down as chairman of the South East Wales TB Eradication Delivery Board after four years the helm. We all know that his contribution to the Wales TB Eradication Programme and his leadership of the regional board have been invaluable, not least in the difficult period after the change of policy from culling to vaccination in the Intensive Action Area.

In terms of the disease picture, we very much hope that the downward trend continues, but we do know that TB statistics can fluctuate.

It is essential that the latest figures are not hijacked by the political lobby that would claim the stats show that badger vaccination is a proven alternative to culling. There is as yet no evidence to suggest that the badger vaccination programme in the Intensive Action Area has had an additional benefit to that experienced across the whole of Wales, and it is still too early to draw any conclusions.

However, with Northern Ireland embarking on a research project for a Test, Vaccinate or Remove policy, and England considering how best to complete the pilot culls, we continue to watch all of these different approaches with great interest and aim to learn from them.

**CYMORTH TB**

An innovative project in Wales that has the full backing of the veterinary profession is Cymorth TB, which provides additional veterinary support and advice to farms that have suffered a TB breakdown. We are very encouraged to hear that the benefits of the scheme, which has now completed its pilot phase, have been recognised and we fully support its wider roll out.

This success is in large part due to the strong relationship that exists between local veterinary surgeons and their clients. Farmer compliance in disease management and control is key and the farmer’s local – *trusted* – vet is best placed to deliver additional services and provide a bridge between policymakers and livestock owners.

**OV TENDERING**

It is this principle that has underpinned our opposition to the AHVLA decision to tender for services provided by Official Veterinarians (or OVs).
A system of competitive tendering in England and Wales to drive down the cost of TB testing risks losing the vital local knowledge that OVs currently bring to the role, and their willingness to provide additional services and surveillance.

However, we have been encouraged by noises in Wales that there will be full recognition of the importance of maintaining the local network of veterinary surgeons. So we await the detail of the tendering exercise with some hope, but also some trepidation.

And we’re very grateful to you, Llyr, for listening to our concerns and raising them at a political level.

**FARMING CONNECT/RDP**

The principle of trusted, local knowledge is a very sound one that has also been recognised via initiatives such as Farming Connect. And we have been pleased to see further commitment to embedding animal health and welfare within the new Rural Development Plan that will take us to 2020. We see a huge role for veterinary surgeons in delivering knowledge transfer and innovation through the Plan.

**24/7**

Part of the thinking behind our opposition to OV tendering has been our concern that the unintended consequence of such a scheme would be to undermine the business model of many of our rural veterinary practices, reducing the available veterinary manpower and making it impossible to reasonably deliver a 24/7 service.

Within the profession we have recently considered how our responsibility to provide emergency veterinary care around the clock should be delivered. We believe that our willingness to provide 24/7 cover and attend emergencies when appropriate is one of the main reasons that our clients and the general public place their trust in us.

But the expectation must be realistic and so we are grateful to our regulator, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, for setting out new guidance that ensures animal owners understand exactly what is reasonable to expect from their veterinary surgeon out of hours and away from the practice.

**MANPOWER/NEW VET SCHOOLS**

The provision of a full out-of-hours service also links to the ongoing question of veterinary manpower across the UK, and I understand that the Minister has commissioned a report on the situation in Wales.

When the University of Surrey announced in 2012 that it was planning to open a new veterinary degree course our members raised significant concerns about the impact increasing numbers of veterinary graduates would have in terms of underemployment, salary suppression, and the quality of veterinary teaching and training.
Market forces will decide whether or not new veterinary schools open and whether existing schools increase their intake, but it’s our job to think about the consequences and to inform decision makers.

The news that the University of Aberystwyth is also considering how it could deliver a veterinary degree course has been met with a wide range of opinion amongst the profession.

There are many practical considerations, such as the ability to deliver extra mural studies via local veterinary practices, the ability to source high quality teaching staff, and the delivery of a course that equips students with a broad set of skills and good employment prospects.

And there are challenges in how we communicate the realities of the veterinary landscape to future generations. Increasing numbers of veterinary scientists in the world is surely a wonderful thing, but they can’t all go into clinical practice, and so we need to explore new career paths and inform prospective students about these options to manage expectations.

**VET HUB**

A particularly exciting dimension to this debate is the development of the idea for a veterinary hub at Aberystwyth.

When AHVLA announced the outcome of the Surveillance 2014 review we were deeply concerned about the loss of veterinary surveillance capacity in Wales.

We have consistently argued that changes to the UK surveillance network must not be based on cost alone, and that the system should not be dismantled before a new one has been tried and tested.

Just as it is true that prevention is better than cure, a robust veterinary surveillance system is a far better investment than the huge bill for a disease outbreak.

We are grateful to Welsh Government and the University of Aberystwyth for thinking creatively about how Wales could respond to the loss of laboratory facilities in Aber. In particular I’d like to thank Professor Will Haresign and local practitioner Phil Thomas for their commitment to this project which has really inspired our Welsh Branch members.

It is still fairly early days but things are moving quickly, and for the vision of a centre of veterinary excellence in Wales to become a reality we need politicians and stakeholders to get behind the concept now.

If we want to move our attention beyond bovine TB and start to tackle some of the other major large animal health and welfare issues – sheep scab and bovine viral diarrhoea, for example – a veterinary hub of research, diagnostics, and teaching, working alongside the centre of expertise in Carmarthen, will surely give us the edge.
Of course one of the greatest challenges to both animal and human health is the threat of antibiotic resistance, which has the potential to become a global catastrophe.

It seems to hit the headlines with alarming regularity as we hear about more cases of resistance and more reports warning us of the looming danger. To ensure healthy animals in the future we must ensure we safeguard veterinary medicines. And so across the country we are taking a lead in raising awareness about the need to use these vital medicines responsibly.

But we mustn’t simply pay lip service to the problem. BVA asks all veterinary surgeons to look at themselves to make sure that they are each playing their part and doing the right things.

Veterinary surveillance has a key role to play here too. We recently announced our commitment to finding a way for veterinary surgeons to record and report antimicrobial usage as part of our action plan to deliver the UK’s five-year antimicrobial resistance strategy.

I believe we are heading in the right direction and so it is frustrating to see the blame culture that often points the finger at the livestock and veterinary communities.

Where bad practice exists it must be stopped, but kneejerk reactions at a European level to remove the right of veterinary surgeons to dispense veterinary medicines could have disastrous consequences for the network of veterinary practices in the UK with no proven benefit for antimicrobial resistance.

We are looking to Welsh Government and parliamentarians across the UK to support the veterinary profession, and trust in the professionalism of veterinary surgeons to use medicines responsibly.

Another issue that is no stranger to the headlines is that of religious slaughter, and earlier this year we found ourselves in the midst of a media frenzy as newspapers clambered over each other to ‘expose’ the use of halal products in supermarkets and on restaurant menus.

The furore went straight to the heart of the issue of trust and of confidence in our foodchain. We know from the horsemeat scandal that we must never underestimate the importance people place in the integrity of the food they buy.

In the many interviews and statements we gave we made it very clear that BVA’s position is about the animal welfare compromise of slaughter without pre-stunning. Reducing the debate to one about halal or kosher food is unhelpful and misses the fact that 88% of halal slaughter in the UK is pre-stunned.

At the end of April we launched our UK-wide epetition calling for an end to non-stun slaughter and we have been delighted to attract over 70,000 signatures in just two months.
If you believe, like I do, that all animals deserve a humane death and you haven’t already given your support to the campaign I urge you to do so now. So please, go home this evening and add your name to our petition.

We recognise that it is a sensitive issue but politicians cannot continue to ignore the public call for better information and clearer labelling. We shouldn’t have to wait for European legislation to make a difference in the future. UK consumers want to have confidence in the food they buy today.

Non-stun slaughter affects millions of animals each year. It’s time to work together and take action.

**FLY-GRAZING**

When faced with the large-scale welfare issue of fly-grazing, we were pleased to see government, charities, and enforcers coming together to find a solution.

In 2013 RSPCA Cymru received nearly 26,000 equine-related inquiries. It’s a shocking statistic, and one that reveals why swift action had to be taken.

With no incentive for owners to identify their horses, no sanctions in place for failing to do so, and no consistent approach to enforcement across local authorities, the situation had reached crisis point.

We therefore welcomed the Control of Horses Act which provides an all-Wales approach with robust options for enforcement, including powers to seize, impound, sell, rehome or – as a last resort – euthanasia.

The Act should prove to be a very useful tool, but it is essential that neglect and abandonment are not simply exported to England and we would strongly urge partnership and cooperation at local authority level along the border.

**RESPONSIBLE OWNERSHIP**

The RSPCA Cymru figures published last month also reveal a shocking 14% increase in the number of cases being reported to the prosecutions department, and a 20% increase in convictions for animal cruelty.

While it is encouraging to note that fewer people are able to abuse or neglect animals with impunity, it is a stark reminder that we still have a long way to go in terms of educating animal owners about their responsibilities.

And the first imperative has to be to source animals responsibly. It’s all too easy for people to go online and search for a new pet and expect to have it almost immediately.

Since the relaxation of the pet travel rules we have become increasingly concerned that non-commercial routes are being exploited by people bringing animals – mainly puppies – over to the UK in large quantities for sale. We have raised questions about the level of enforcement as
veterinary surgeons find themselves more frequently presented with patients with an unknown history.

**DOG BREEDING REGS**

With such a large number of dogs coming into the UK for sale there is clearly a mismatch between supply and demand within our own borders.

We need to raise the standard of breeding establishments at home and continue to educate potential owners about the best way to ensure they have a healthy, happy puppy.

BVA has been very supportive of moves in Wales to update dog breeding regulations and we recognise that bringing all of the stakeholders together has been a challenge.

The new regulations aren’t perfect but they are a significant step in the right direction. They will bring many more breeders under the scrutiny of local authorities, and provide for improved socialisation and enrichment.

There has been much debate about the ratio of staff to adult dogs and we are pleased to see that the regulations set out 1 to 20 as a baseline safety net, rather than the norm, and that there will be an expectation that individual circumstances are taken into account, as well as the opportunity for local authorities to review the set ratio.

When the full regulations are reviewed we would like to see more emphasis on responsible breeding from a health point of view with reference to reducing the likelihood of hereditary disease, the provision of veterinary services, and the recording of veterinary medicines.

The real measure of success of the new regulations will be for Wales to finally throw off its unenviable reputation for puppy farming.

In the meantime we will continue to educate potential owners by repeating the mantra that you must always see a puppy with its mother before buying, and recommending that owners refer to the AWF/RSPCA puppy contract and puppy information pack to understand exactly what to ask of breeders.

**MICROCHIPPING**

The breeding regulations will also be enhanced by the introduction of compulsory microchipping in March next year. Veterinary surgeons up and down the country are talking to their clients now to ensure they are aware of the new legislation and stressing the need to not just chip, but to have up-to-date information on the database.

We have to get the message out to the public that this is a legal requirement to microchip and register, otherwise the whole system could be undermined.
**EXOTICS**

The question of responsible ownership extends far beyond dogs and in recent months BVA has been considering how to approach the contentious issue of exotic pets – a category that encompasses a very wide range of species.

We have concluded that we may have to say that some species have such complex welfare and husbandry needs that it is no longer acceptable for them to be kept in untrained hands.

We are therefore considering the value of evidence-based lists of suitable species to be kept by people with different levels of expertise, and will be looking to industry and experts to feed in so that we have buy-in from across the board.

**WELSH BRANCH**

I’d like to end this evening by paying tribute to colleagues in BVA Welsh Branch. The Branch is still only in its infancy but it is becoming a major stakeholder and a trusted source of informed veterinary opinion for Welsh Government and industry.

The more we can ensure the veterinary voice is part of the conversation on animal health and welfare and public health, the better.

And it is thanks to you, our colleagues and stakeholders, that we are given the opportunity to provide such input.

Thank you.

~ENDS~