Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the British Veterinary Association’s annual Scottish dinner, here in Holyrood. I am incredibly grateful to our host, John Scott, who has once again allowed us to enjoy some excellent Scottish food in these fine surroundings.

As you may be aware we had invited Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead to speak this evening, but - unfortunately – our dinner has clashed with an Agriculture Council meeting in Luxembourg. However, I am really very pleased to welcome Acting Chief Veterinary Officer Sheila Voas who has kindly agreed to step in to provide Scottish Government’s perspective on some of the current issues facing those of us in the animal health and welfare sector.

But before we hear from Sheila, I would like to outline the current thinking of the veterinary profession here in Scotland and the rest of the UK in a number of key areas.

I’m now more than halfway through my presidential year and the theme for the year is ‘delivering a healthy future’. I have spent the majority of my veterinary career in large animal work, mostly cattle, and know from many years of experience the importance of the veterinary role in delivering food safety, food security and public health. Through my work as an external examiner at Glasgow vet school, I understand the importance of delivering high calibre veterinary graduates to secure the future of the profession. And in my work with government – before and during my time as a BVA Officer – I have followed the journey from policy making to policy delivery on the ground.

Earlier today we met with colleagues from NFUS, and were pleased to hear the high value placed by farmers on vets that deliver good health and welfare for their animals.

A key component of that work is the veterinary role in surveillance – working with farmers to create the first line of defence against exotic disease. Over the past year or so the emergence of the Schmallenberg virus has been a stark reminder to us all of the need for a robust surveillance network across the UK and Europe.

While we hope – and expect – that Schmallenberg won’t travel so far north as to reach Scotland, we must remember there is still much we don’t understand about this infection and farmers must remain vigilant and ensure vets are brought onto the farm at the first sign of anything suspicious.

Meanwhile, I am sorry to hear reports that bleeding calf syndrome has not gone away despite the precautionary withdrawal of the Pregsure BVD vaccine by Pfizer. Two years ago this disease was virtually unheard of and in a short space of time it became a pan-European problem.
The profession has supported the work being carried out at Moredun and the SAC and we urge everyone involved to continue working vigorously towards a conclusion.

Bleeding calf syndrome was first brought to national attention by veterinary surgeons working with farming clients and local surveillance centres, and it is essential that this link between practitioners and diagnostics is not lost as policy work on the future of surveillance in Scotland is developed.

These two examples remind us of the vital importance of a robust veterinary surveillance system, and the value of collaboration at the highest level internationally. This time last year we eagerly awaited the report of the Kinnaird Review into veterinary surveillance. When it came in November we were pleased to see the recognition of the high quality of service provided by the SAC Disease Surveillance Centres, but we were concerned that the report left many questions unanswered.

Seven months on and many of those questions remain. But we are pleased that work is now being progressed by the strategic board and we welcome the inclusion of independent veterinary representation on the board from former BVA President Freda Scott-Park and Glasgow University’s Dominic Mellor – both of whom I’m delighted to welcome here this evening.

We look forward to engaging with the board as it consults with industry and the profession and will be looking for tangible results soon.

Exotic disease creates an unwelcome distraction from our core work battling endemic disease; battles that can only be fought successfully by utilising the combined troops of industry, government and the veterinary profession.

This is no better illustrated than in the current Bovine Viral Diarrhoea eradication plan. The staged approach taken by Scottish Government has ensured the plan goes from strength to strength with genuine buy-in from industry and a real understanding amongst stakeholders of where it is heading.

From a practitioner point of view, we have welcomed the recognition of the value of vets visiting farms and the Government’s investment in high quality CPD for vets, delivered online by SAC and via an event organised by our specialist division the British Cattle Veterinary Association.

As we approach the next stage of the programme, which will introduce a movement ban on persistently infected cattle, I would urge all stakeholders to engage with the consultation to ensure we continue to work together to see the plan through.

The investment – of time and money – in the BVD programme has, in part, been made possible by the freeing up of resources through the introduction of risk-based TB testing and the achievement of being recognised as regionally Officially TB Free.

Evidence-based disease control is exactly the approach that vets recommend to clients on a daily basis and we pay tribute to the work done by Professor David Logue and his colleagues at Glasgow University to make this important principle a reality.

The recent confirmation of TB in a dairy herd in West Lothian thankfully does not affect Scotland’s TB-free status or current routine herd testing. But it does serve as a timely reminder about the role of veterinary inspection at slaughter, which I was pleased to see NFUS highlighting in the media as an “important component of Scotland’s surveillance system”. Something we hope Scottish Government will keep at the forefront of future discussions on meat inspection.
Underpinning the delivery of surveillance, eradication plans and risk-based testing is the truly excellent work of Scotland’s research institutes – SAC, Moredun, Roslin, Rowett, the James Hutton Institute, the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, the private labs – Biobest and NMR – and all of the organisations they work with in partnership.

I’d like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of Professor Bill McKelvey who steered the SAC to its highly respected position before retiring earlier this year. I was very pleased to be able to attend Bill’s final AGM at Murrayfield where it was plain to see the very high regard in which he is held. And I’m delighted that BVA will continue to benefit from Bill’s expertise as a member of our Veterinary Policy Group.

Perhaps most encouraging is the ongoing willingness for these world-class institutions to collaborate, thus cementing Scotland as a leading nation for veterinary scientific expertise and - through the newly created EPIC Centre of Expertise - ensuring Scottish Government has access to the best possible advice on disease control.

UK veterinary surgeons are also leading the way on antimicrobial resistance – a significant global problem facing human and animal medicine.

In recent years, as MRSA and other resistant bacteria have hit the headlines, our profession has come under increasing pressure to justify its use of antimicrobials (or antibiotics as they are more commonly known).

In a kneejerk reaction to those headlines last year the European Parliament called into question our right to prescribe and dispense veterinary medicines and to use antimicrobials prophylactically on farm.

In January we welcomed new research from the University of Glasgow, which went some way towards redefining the debate over the role of veterinary medicine in human resistance to antimicrobials.

Ultimately, the answer lies not in blaming vets or doctors, but in working together to champion the responsible use of these medicines in both humans and animals; something the BVA and our European body (the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe) have long advocated. We know we must use antimicrobials responsibly, or risk losing them altogether.

Removing a veterinary surgeon’s right to prescribe medicines according to his/her clinical judgement can only serve to harm animal health and welfare. And we hope that as this debate continues in Europe, we can count on Scottish Government - and industry - to support your veterinary professionals and their ability to prescribe responsibly.

Antimicrobial resistance is just one area where we work with our human medicine counterparts. In April we supported similar cooperation in a different field with the launch of the Domestic Abuse Veterinary Initiative – a collaboration led by Medics Against Violence, between the Links Group, OneKind, Crimestoppers, Pet Fostering Scotland and the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit.

It is an important piece of work bringing the whole medical community together (doctors, dentists and vets) to tackle domestic abuse. It provides advice and training for medical professionals to enable them to provide human and animal victims with every possible chance to reach out for help.
The initiative has been pioneered in Scotland, and through our membership of the Links Group – and Freda’s passionate commitment to the cause – we are hopeful that it can be rolled out across the UK.

Human attitudes to animals have come on leaps and bounds in recent decades, underpinned by the momentous Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006.

While BVA supported the introduction of the legislation, and similar legislation in England, Wales, and - more recently - Northern Ireland, we know that its strength lies in its enforcement and in the secondary legislation it enables.

As a member of the Parliament’s Cross Party Group on Animal Welfare we have recently questioned the Cabinet Secretary on the level of progress made on secondary legislation under the Act. Five years since it came into force and we are yet to see proposals from the Government on pet vending, animal sanctuaries, livery yards, riding establishments, boarding kennels, dog breeding and performing animals.

And while we were pleased to see early welfare codes for dogs, cats and equids we remain concerned that neither Scotland nor England has brought forward a welfare code for rabbits.

Rabbits are the UK’s third most popular pet and vets are seeing more and more husbandry-related problems, including dental disease and obesity – problems that could, in part, be tackled with improved education and awareness.

Of the long list of issues waiting to be progressed I would also like to highlight dog breeding. Unlike other parts of the UK, Scotland is – fortunately – not particularly identified with puppy farming. But we believe it is an area that would greatly benefit from a consistent approach that would prevent the problem being exported across borders.

In April the BVA’s charity, the Animal Welfare Foundation, and the RSPCA launched the puppy contract and puppy information pack (or PIP) – a voluntary scheme designed to give potential puppy buyers the right tools and information to ensure their new puppy is healthy and well-socialised.

While we have received a huge amount of positive feedback and endorsements from major animal welfare organisations and breeders, we know that the contract and PIP need to be supported by stronger legislation.

In Wales and Northern Ireland a significant amount of work has already been carried out by welfare organisations, veterinary professionals, breeders and other experts to draw up legislative proposals and we would strongly urge Scotland and England to take a look.

Another area where Scotland is in danger of falling – unhelpfully – out of step with the rest of the UK is the compulsory microchipping of dogs. Unlike the control of dogs where the Scottish Government led the way with a more preventive approach, here it is in danger of being left behind. England and Wales are currently consulting on a compulsory system and Northern Ireland is now in its first year of mandatory microchipping.

At the heart of this policy – which the BVA has long championed – is dog welfare, the ability to reunite lost dogs quickly and safely with their owners, and responsible ownership.

Figures from England reveal that significant savings could be made to the public purse by reducing the burden of stray dogs, while the cost to individual dog owners is minimal. It’s a win-win policy and
one that enjoys the support of a wide range of stakeholders. And, as June is National Microchipping Month across the UK, I will take this opportunity to ask everyone here to offer their support too.

Society’s changing attitudes to animals have, in part, been shaped by our ever increasing knowledge and understanding of other species and the investment in welfare science.

The veterinary voice on welfare is strong because it is evidence-based.

Right now the Government is reviewing the evidence base upon which its bold position on tail docking was taken in 2007. The BVA, and our specialist division the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, have made our position in favour of a complete ban clear, but we are prepared to review and discuss our position in light of new and compelling scientific data.

It is the wealth of data that has made our position on slaughter without pre-stunning so clear and compelling.

The BVA believes strongly that slaughter without stunning unnecessarily compromises animal welfare. EU and UK law requires animals to be stunned before slaughter but there are exemptions for slaughter by a religious method.

We know that this is a difficult issue politically but as the Government and FSA consider the implementation of the new EU Directive on welfare at slaughter we urge them to keep it in mind.

We also want to move away from the religious arguments and instead concentrate on the right of consumers to make higher welfare choices with the food they buy.

The outlook is brighter in Scotland, with very little, if any, non-stun slaughter and an industry that recognises the value of pre-stunning. However, as long as non-stun slaughter is taking place, and able to enter the mainstream food chain, it must be clearly labelled, and this is something we are pursuing with policy makers across the UK and Europe.

Like non-stun slaughter, the use of wild animals in circuses is an issue that is increasingly shaped by consumer attitudes to animal welfare, and one that in Scotland is not defined in terms of numbers.

The Government is fully aware of the views of the major stakeholders on this issue, through the Cross Party Group and other representations. While we understand that it is not a priority in these resource-scarce times, we hope it doesn’t fall off the radar completely.

The use of these majestic creatures in travelling circuses, which cannot meet their welfare needs, is emblematic of the way we treat animals and a future ban would send a strong message.

To end this evening I’d like to bring us back to my presidential theme and the responsibility of the BVA to deliver a healthy future for our profession. I started this evening by talking about the excellent collaboration and cooperation between vets, farmers and Government on disease eradication and surveillance.

When Professor Lowe produced his report for the UK Government in 2009 looking at the availability of veterinary services he found no overall shortfall, but he identified a number of challenges for the profession and recommended the establishment of a Veterinary Development Council.
The BVA took up the mantle and the VDC was established in January 2011 and reported its findings and recommendations to the BVA last month.

The overall aim of the VDC’s independent chairman, Professor Richard Bennett, was to bring together stakeholders throughout the food chain and improve engagement with the veterinary profession at each stage. We were pleased to welcome representation on the VDC from Scottish Government alongside veterinary surgeons, regulators, producers, processors, retailers, the veterinary schools, and the veterinary pharmaceutical industry.

The VDC identified the future role of veterinary technicians as a particular challenge. It is an issue that will affect all animal keepers and so we will be looking to you and your organisations as we progress this issue with our regulator, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, to help us move the debate on and ensure all animals continue to receive the best level of healthcare.

Professor Lowe’s report also highlighted the work of the Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme, which he deemed essential for ensuring an affordable veterinary presence is made available to the crofting community.

Freda has clearly been very busy (!) and she recently reported back to BVA that a new contract and guidance for the Scheme has now been agreed and signed.

This is good news for the crofters and other farmers, and the vets that serve those areas, and while we are very grateful for the commitment made by Scottish Government we would ask that as much resource as possible is made available to ensure the ongoing success of the Scheme.

For me, the Highlands and Islands Scheme embodies the principles of working together to deliver animal health and welfare and provides a good example to the rest of the UK of how such partnership working can achieve positive outcomes.

We are grateful to all of you not only for joining us this evening, but for your ongoing engagement with the veterinary profession and support for the BVA. Without our collaborative approach I feel certain we would not be in a position to deliver a healthy future.

I will now hand over to Acting CVO Sheila Voas, who is an excellent ambassador for veterinary science within Government and Scotland's agri-food sector, to respond to some of the issues I've raised this evening.

Thank you.

~ENDS~