Cabinet Secretary, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the annual Scottish dinner of the British Veterinary Association here in Holyrood. And first of all I’d like to extend a very sincere thank you to our host John Scott who has once again made it possible for us to enjoy these wonderful surroundings.

Before I get into the main issues that I would like to talk to you all about this evening, I’d like to mention a few people. Congratulations to Ronnie Soutar, who - as many of you know - has today become the President of BVA Scottish Branch. Ronnie has been an excellent Junior Vice President, is a highly valued member of our Veterinary Policy Group, and a very well respected colleague at BVA. It’s fantastic to have you at the helm Ronnie.

I’d also like to say a huge thank you to Robert Anderson, Ronnie’s predecessor, who has done an excellent two-year stint as President of Branch. Robert has become an incredibly well respected advocate for the profession in Scotland and has taken a lead on many of the issues I will talk about tonight.

Congratulations also to Sheila Voas who has now stopped ‘acting’ and has become a permanent fixture since the last time we held this event, and to Colin Macaldowie who has recently been appointed Deputy CVO – an excellent team that everyone at BVA enjoys working with.

And finally, congratulations to our speaker, Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead, who became a BVA honorary associate last summer in recognition of his longstanding support for the veterinary profession and commitment to animal health and welfare. We very much look forward to hearing his perspective on some of the key issues facing the veterinary profession, a number of which I’d like to touch on.

The theme for my Presidential year is ‘vets adding value’, and I hope you’ll agree that across a multitude of areas it is exactly what our profession is delivering here, across the length and breadth of Scotland. We are a small profession but our knowledge and training across all species and in public health ensure that we can add value for our clients whether they are farmers, pet owners, government, those who benefit from our research work, or consumers. Our contribution to the public good is undoubtedly very considerable and acknowledged and appreciated by society at large.
My own background has been in pharmaceutical research and European regulatory affairs in the public and private sector, so I am acutely aware of the value of those colleagues here this evening who work in the field of research. Veterinary-led research in Scotland is undoubtedly driving world famous research into animal diseases and medicines. I am truly in awe of the work undertaken in institutes like the Moredun, SAC, the Roslin, Rowett, and the James Hutton Institute, as well as the Glasgow and Dick vet schools, and the private labs – Biobest and NMR – in advancing the research agenda.

**RESISTANCE**

Just last week I was delighted to learn of the breakthrough at Moredun in the development of a recombinant vaccine to protect sheep from parasitic gastroenteritis – a breakthrough that could not have come at a better time as the threat of resistance looms large, notably in grazing animals.

For certain diseases the situation is critical and we urgently need the development of new medicines. Liver fluke is posing the most serious challenge yet because the recent wet weather conditions provide such an ideal environment for this parasite to thrive. While the availability of flukicidal products is a cause for concern across the UK, it is our members in Scotland and Wales who have sounded the alarm bells most vigorously.

We are looking to the regulator – the Veterinary Medicines Directorate – to find solutions that could facilitate the fast track for licensing of more flukicides coming through the R&D pipeline, without companies necessarily having to have the full dossier of data available, so provisional authorisation can be granted.

Antimicrobial and anthelmintic resistance is an issue that vets and farmers face on an almost daily basis. It is a huge threat and, in the case of antimicrobials, a challenge in the socio-political sense as well for those of us working in animal health. We are bombarded with accusations of irresponsible use in the agricultural sector with much of the media reporting of the issue continually pointing the finger of blame for human antibiotic resistance at the veterinary use of antimicrobials, without the necessary scientific evidence.

We were therefore pleased that in her annual report published in March, the UK Chief Medical Officer Dame Sally Davies acknowledged that by far the greater problem is over prescribing and inappropriate use in the human sector. Last week we were pleased to see UK Science Minister David Willetts identify the global challenge of antibiotic resistance as a key issue for the G8 summit and we urged him to draw on the positive measures taken here in the UK and Europe to press for action internationally.

Yet many media reports of the G8 Science Meeting trotted out the same accusations, again without evidence.

It is these inaccurate headlines that put pressure on politicians to “do something” and that has led to calls for measures to restrict the veterinary surgeon’s right to prescribe and dispense antimicrobials, despite the current scientific view not supporting these moves.

But, of course, that doesn’t mean we do nothing. The BVA works with many bodies to promote the responsible use of these vital medicines for the good of animals and humans, and the campaign on this front will continue both here and in Brussels.

**SBV**

The idea of fast tracking the authorisation procedure by the VMD is what enabled the recent announcement of a provisional licence for a vaccine against the Schmallenberg virus, which emerged from northern continental Europe in 2011.
A new exotic disease is unsettling amongst the farming and veterinary communities and so the collaboration last year between Scottish Government, NFUS, SAC and Moredun to offer free post-movement testing and mapping, and the surveillance scheme this year between Biobest, SAC Consulting Veterinary Services, and NFUS have sent a strong message of support, and played a crucial role in surveillance.

With a vaccine now available farmers can better plan how to protect their flocks and herds from this disease. But with the uncertainties around the immunity which follows infection, good veterinary advice will be essential in deciding how, where and when to use the vaccine to protect animals and their offspring.

SURVEILLANCE

The emergence of a new disease also underlines the vital importance of a robust veterinary surveillance scheme. Across the UK consideration is being given to the best way to deliver veterinary surveillance in a way that is also cost-effective; a big challenge for all administrations in these austere times we live in.

It is now more than 18 months since the Kinnaird Review reported. While we accept that it’s a hugely important issue that we must get right, all those who undertake veterinary surveillance in Scotland would appreciate some conclusions from the Strategic Management Board very soon, particularly at BVA where we all want, and need, to be a part of the solution.

BVD

Surveillance is not only in place to protect against exotic disease; it plays a vital role in tackling endemic disease as well.

We know this from our work tackling bovine TB in England, Wales and Northern Ireland where we continue to pursue a policy that embraces all of the available tools to move towards freedom for the whole of the UK.

Here in Scotland the veterinary profession has been playing a key role in the Government’s BVD eradication scheme. On BVD, Scotland truly has taken the lead and we are now seeing other parts of the UK looking to emulate what is being achieved here, and I’m particularly pleased that my own country Wales is looking to follow your example.

Despite frustrations and delays caused by legal and European issues, we’re very pleased to see that the scheme here is achieving 90% compliance with testing requirements and that it will be ready to move to the next phase towards the end of the year.

By taking appropriate advice from their local vets, farmers are able to use the best combination of testing, vaccinating and other biosecurity measures to achieve BVD control and eradication.

JOHNE’S

But why stop at BVD eradication? BVA has given full support to the PARABAN project aimed at tackling Johne’s disease – a notoriously challenging and frustrating problem for farmers and their vets. We expect that it will be a long hard slog, but we must start somewhere and BVA Scottish Branch and our individual members are keen to play a part in the next steps.

Healthy farms mean a healthy and thriving food industry, and that’s exactly how vets add value to Scotland’s “natural larder” – to quote your excellent phrase Cabinet Secretary.
AQUACULTURE

But it’s not just livestock where vets are adding this value. The veterinary role in ensuring a healthy aquaculture industry supports one of Scotland’s major industries, with significant export implications.

Our fish vets are finding innovative approaches to the control of old and new problems – from sea lice to amoebic gill disease – and practitioners at the Fish Vet Group are involved in scientific research with the Moredun demonstrating the value of practitioners at all levels.

Right now we’re working in Europe through the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe to ensure that fish vets are recognised for their particular expertise and to address issues relating to non-veterinary staff (or aquatic animal health professionals) in the new EU Animal Health Regulation in terms of their regulation, education and professional status.

HORSE PASSPORTS

We are also working in a European context, closely with our colleagues in the British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA), to address the problems raised by the horsemeat scandal earlier this year. The news shook the country and undermined confidence in the food chain. It called into question the veracity of the horse passport system, which is clearly not fit for purpose.

BEVA has recently undertaken surveys as part of the Equine Sector Council to determine the levels of understanding and compliance with the legislation across the industry. The results are worrying with the Sector Council concluding that they found “a catalogue of misunderstanding, patchy compliance, lack of enforcement, and a struggling system without controls of consequences.”

All groups surveyed cited a lack of a centralised database as a major reason for poor compliance and that is why we have consistently called for a single database and compulsory microchipping and registration.

The news was also compounded by scare stories about residues of phenylbutazone, and the BVA and BEVA were very active in the public arena working to put the issue into perspective from a risk analysis viewpoint.

There are many lessons to be learned from the scandal, but perhaps the overriding message is that the value people put on the integrity of their food can never be underestimated.

WELFARE AT SLAUGHTER

It is for this reason that we have also championed a European-wide animal welfare label for food derived from animals. Welfare labelling is an issue that has been at the forefront of the debate over welfare at slaughter and the BVA’s call for all animals to be stunned before slaughter.

We are grateful to Scottish Government for consulting over these sensitive issues and we look forward to working with you to implement a solution that offers the highest levels of animal welfare, whilst respecting the views of certain religious communities. In the absence of a complete ban on non-stun slaughter we are calling for measures to reduce the amount of non-stunned slaughter – through labelling and controls to ensure there is not an oversupply of such meat into the secular market – and to reduce the welfare harm to those animals – through immediate post-cut stunning and mandatory veterinary presence.

HEALTH & SAFETY

I’ve talked a lot about the health of the animals we are responsible for, but the farms where livestock are kept must also be a healthy environment for the people who work there. And that is why I am
grateful to our Scottish Branch for kickstarting the discussions at BVA regarding on-farm health and safety. (And I know that during his presidential term Robert has been a real champion for this project.)

There really is no “safe” time of year to work with livestock. We care for the safety of our members and all our farming colleagues, and so our Members Services Group is working with the Health & Safety Executive and the farming unions to draw on best practice, identify legal issues and pull together useful tools to ensure vets, farmers, technicians and students stay safe. I think this is going to be a major step forward in preventing the awful accidents and injuries that we hear about all too often.

LINKS

For a profession committed to animal health and welfare, we do a lot of work within our Association on human wellbeing – not only of our members but also the public. Last year at this event we spoke about the collaboration led by Medics Against Violence to launch the Domestic Abuse Veterinary Initiative (or DAVI) – a scheme designed to educate veterinary surgeons on how to spot signs of domestic abuse, how to make the links between animal and human abuse, and how to report any concerns safely.

I’m pleased to report that the first pilot training session took place in Stirling in April and was deemed a great success. Much of that success is down to Freda Scott Park who is the BVA rep on the Links Group, which she also chairs.

Freda spoke about the initiative at (our charity) the Animal Welfare Foundation’s annual discussion forum in May and, amongst many excellent presentations, it was the one that everyone wanted to talk about later on. No one who heard Freda’s talk could help but feel very moved by the individual stories she recounted. She made a plea for all vets to be on the lookout for what she describes as that “Golden moment” when they might just have recognised the first signs of abuse in animals that are a pointer to a more sinister problem. And no one could have missed the strong message from her colleagues in the Strathclyde police to “just bloody do something”.

The training is highly recommended for the whole practice team, who see the best of the human-animal bond and, sadly, the worst of it.

DOG CONTROL

The relationship between an owner and their pet is crucial and, when it comes to dogs, the behaviour of the animal is largely dictated by the actions of the human at the other end of the lead.

That is why we were so supportive of Scottish Government’s move away from breed-specific legislation and towards a more preventive approach that recognised that any dog can behave badly in the wrong hands.

The introduction of Dog Control Notices under the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act is something that the BVA fully supports and continues to champion in the rest of the UK.

The recent review of the DCNs by local authorities has raised a number of issues and concerns about how they are working in practice, but it is right that they are reviewed in this way and we hope that the Government will take note of these concerns and work with local authorities to ensure the system is increasingly effective.

MICROCHIPPING
But while Scotland led the way on dog control the same cannot be said for dog microchipping, where Northern Ireland, Wales and England will all have compulsory systems in place by April 2016.

Microchipping is a safe and effective way of ensuring that lost and stray dogs can be reunited with their owners. It is an essential part of responsible ownership and animal welfare, and I would urge the Government to look again at the benefits of a compulsory system in Scotland.

**PET VENDING/PAAG**

On the wider issue of pet animal welfare we were very pleased to learn that the Government has started talks on pet vending legislation. It’s been a long time coming; the need for reform was highlighted during the consultation on the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act back in 2004. But we’re very pleased that it is back on the agenda now and I’d like to thank the Cross Party Group for its efforts in making sure that happened.

The explosion of internet shopping has resulted in a culture that says ‘I want this now and I can have it’. But when it comes to our pets, I’m afraid that’s just not acceptable.

The BVA is a member of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) which is campaigning to ensure websites that allow the advertising of animals for sale do so responsibly.

We’ve got a long way to go. Cats Protection report that 30% of the cats waiting to be rehomed in the Glasgow centre are from Gumtree because they are either sick/injured or had gone to inappropriate homes.

We want to see codes of conduct for these websites enforced across the UK and endorsed by the four administrations. And we also need a huge public awareness campaign with all of us – vets, charities, and government working together to give a consistent message to potential animal owners.

We believe that part of the answer is the AWF/RSPCA puppy contract and puppy information pack, which was launched last year and is currently undergoing a review. When we re-launch the contract this autumn I hope you will all support its key message that you should never buy a puppy without a contract.

**MICE**

And finally, talking of procuring pet animals I’d like to offer the BVA’s support for Christine Grahame’s suggestion that Scottish Parliament employs the services of a chief mouser. I’m sure one lucky vet will be only too pleased to add his/her individual value by looking after the cat that keeps the Scottish democratic processes going!

Hopefully we won’t spot any wee beasties tonight and you’ll all very much enjoy your dinner.

But before you do I’m delighted to hand over to Cabinet Secretary – and BVA honorary associate – Richard Lochhead to respond to some of the issues I’ve raised this evening and give Scottish Government’s perspective.

Thank you

~ENDS~