Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the British Veterinary Association’s annual Scottish dinner and thank you all for joining us tonight. I’d like to say a particular thank you to John Scott MSP, our kind host for this evening and a long-standing supporter of the BVA and the veterinary profession, and to Richard Lochhead MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment. We’re delighted that you have agreed to respond on behalf of our guests.

We’re doing things slightly differently this evening with the speeches at the start of the dinner. Hopefully this will provoke some debate and discussion on your tables throughout the meal, and it also allows me to enjoy my food without the worry of delivering a speech at the end of it!

I’d like to start by saying a few words about Simon Hall, our Chief Veterinary Officer. At last year’s dinner Simon had just been appointed and my predecessor Nicky Paull wished him well in his new post.

Little did we know that in less than twelve months he’d have overseen the designation of Scotland as officially TB free and, along with the rest of Great Britain, as a Lower Risk Zone for Bluetongue. I’m not sure if Simon has a magic wand, but if so, would you like to wave it over England, Wales and Northern Ireland too please?

Credit is of course due to Simon, but in truth these successes (of which more later) are mainly due to the fantastic partnership enjoyed in Scotland between the Government, industry, and the veterinary profession.

They also highlight the significant ‘public good’ role performed by veterinary surgeons across the country and as many of you will know, vets and the public good is the theme of my Presidential year. So it’s this role and the concept of partnership working that forms the basis of my speech tonight.

The most recent example of this partnership can be seen in the publication of the Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD) eradication plan, into which the veterinary profession has had significant input. At last year’s BVA Congress in Cardiff, the four Chief Veterinary Officers of the UK were asked which disease, other than TB, would they eradicate if they had the money and political will. Simon Hall was first off the blocks and without hesitation said BVD.

Well, it would certainly appear from the proposed scheme that the political will is there and we are grateful to you, Minister, for that.

Orkney and Shetland have already experienced an enormous amount of success in eradicating the disease and the key to that success has been the farming community and veterinary profession working together. I urge everyone involved in the sector to respond to the consultation and make
sure that the proposed plan is workable. And like so many other innovations in Scotland, I hope this will also provide a template for dealing with BVD in the rest of Britain.

We must also take a partnership approach to new and emerging diseases. The appearance of bovine neonatal pancytopenia – bleeding calf syndrome – in Europe is a worrying development. I am aware that a lot of work is going on to try to better understand the cause of the syndrome.

Unproven links have been made with the BVD vaccine, and earlier this week Pfizer voluntarily stopped selling Pregsure BVD in all EU Member States. But I must reiterate that the links remain unproven and the advice to farmers is to continue using their proven vaccination programmes. The threat of BVD is far greater at this stage and this is not the time to stop vaccinating.

The Scottish Agricultural College is providing a subsidised post mortem service and the profession has been urged to report any suspected adverse reactions (SARs) to the VMD. We will continue to do all we can to support the research work into bleeding calf syndrome and the British Cattle Veterinary Association (BCVA) will be including a session on it at BCVA Congress this October to help vets improve their knowledge and understanding of the current thinking.

I mentioned earlier Scotland’s successful bid to become Officially Tuberculosis Free (OTF) last September. Again the success is due to the partnership approach taken by the farming industry, veterinary profession and Scottish Government, carrying out rigorous pre- and post-movement testing.

For future success it is vital that industry gets behind stricter cattle measures and tougher testing regimes. The recent confirmed case near Keith is a reminder of this message to the farming community. If we want to remain bTB free, then we must accept some of the difficulties that come with it.

Another success story is the very recent move to a Lower Risk Zone for Blue tongue (BTV8) in Britain, which comes into force this Saturday. The introduction of the LRZ is a hard-fought battle for us all and, from a Great Britain perspective, I pay tribute to my colleague Nicky Paull, the UK’s Chief Veterinary Officer Nigel Gibbens and others who sit on the Bluetongue Core Group at Defra.

In Scotland, there is no doubt that the Government’s compulsory vaccination campaign in 2008-09 was a tremendous success, with 94% compliance, in keeping Scotland bluetongue free.

But despite the additional protection that the LRZ affords us, I must reiterate the message of ongoing vaccination and vigilance.

Farmers must continue to source responsibly. It is important to remember that a small, but significant, number of pregnant animals could be carrying a BTV-infected foetus but still respond negatively to the post-import blood test. If the newborn animal infects the local midge population it could restart the circulation of the disease, and once in the midge population we know it can spread across large distances in short periods of time.

The LRZ is an important step towards disease-free status and we must continue to work together to ensure that it becomes a reality.

In tackling all of these major diseases one key partner is Scotland’s research fraternity. We really are spoilt for choice when it comes to world-leading animal health and welfare research. And I am delighted to announce that the clinical CPD element of BVA Congress will this year be delivered by the combined expertise of the Moredun Research Institute, the Roslin Institute and Royal (Dick)
School of Veterinary Studies, the University of Glasgow’s Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, and the Scottish Agricultural College.

Last October the Scottish Government recognised the excellence of these research bodies and praised the contribution of Scotland’s Science Institutes in creating high-value jobs, boosting Scotland’s intellectual reputation, and saving vast sums of money.

However, last month, the leading livestock representative bodies in Scotland wrote an open letter to The Scotsman setting out grave concerns regarding the Government’s misguided view that animal health research does not fit within its wider research funding aims in food and drink policy, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and maintaining valued habitats and landscapes.

Tonight I would like to add the veterinary profession’s significant voice to the call for reassurances that the Government is committed to funding research on animal health, such as that carried out by the Moredun, SAC, and the two veterinary schools.

Along with research, the other key ingredient in the fight against disease is surveillance and I am pleased to welcome the Government’s review of veterinary surveillance this year.

Surveillance is perhaps the most overt ‘public good’ function carried out by vets – protecting the health and welfare of both animals and humans. We are the eyes, ears and calipers on the ground.

I look forward to contributing to the review, which is being carried out under the chairmanship of John Kinnaird, and hope that the remit of the panel will be as wide as possible.

Unfortunately, I don’t think I’m being too dramatic when I say that the work of vets as the eyes and ears of disease surveillance is in danger of being seriously undermined by Animal Health.

As many of you will know the BVA has, for many years, negotiated with the relevant Government department over fees for Official Veterinarians (OVs) on behalf of the profession.

During our negotiations last year, Animal Health made it clear that there was a set budget for OV work and the hourly fee that BVA was asking for (based on current fees in general practice) would not be available. In December BVA Council rejected Animal Health’s offer on the grounds that it was based on the available budget and not on a professional fee. We advised members that they would need to make an individual business decision on whether to continue OV work.

Negotiations on other matters of OV work continued and in May Animal Health unexpectedly announced that it could no longer guarantee a ring-fenced budget for OV work and that European and domestic law stated that future OV work would have to be put out to tender.

This shock announcement has left the veterinary profession with a number of grave concerns, not least the significant potential for loss of goodwill and a shortage of vets available for OV work.

It may be too early for the Scottish Government to have developed a position on this issue, but I hope, Minister, that you can understand the ramifications of this move for essential surveillance and disease-control work in Scotland, and understand the profession’s concerns.

If these concerns that the future delivery of OV work could be compromised are realised, the UK Government runs the risk of further reducing the pool of vets available to carry out vital work.
The question of the availability of vets is one that seems to come up regularly, particularly in Scotland. Last year Professor Lowe joined us for this dinner shortly before the publication of his report on veterinary expertise in food animal production.

Prof Lowe set out a number of challenges for the profession but concluded that there is no absolute shortfall in the supply of veterinarians in farm animal work. Yet, despite this conclusion there remains a question mark over the availability of vets. Just today we heard from NFUS of an ongoing concern regarding the availability of large animal vets and the need for well-informed, educated and experienced specialist veterinary surgeons to work on the increasingly technical side of livestock farming.

In order to move forward the BVA will be setting up a Veterinary Development Council to consider how the profession can meet these challenges, and I very much hope that the voice of experience in Scotland will be strongly reflected in that group.

Not least because of the experience of the Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme, which I understand is going from strength to strength in tackling the perceived problem of shortfall. I would like to congratulate Freda Scott-Park for taking up the reins and for a very successful year. Another fine example of partnership working in action.

So, what does partnership working look like in the future?

Last year Nicky outlined the BVA’s significant concerns regarding Defra’s proposals for responsibility and cost sharing in England. Like you, Minister, we raised concerns about the timing, amongst other things. I’m pleased to report that the new Secretary of State, Caroline Spelman, has announced her department’s intention to wait for the report of the Responsibility and Cost Sharing Advisory Group, on which I sit as a veterinary representative.

We are also pleased to note the announcement last month of the establishment of the Expert Forum here in Scotland to consider how responsibility and cost sharing can be realised in this country, and we look forward to contributing to the debate.

I’ve spent a lot of time this evening talking about large animal issues, but there is much to celebrate on the companion animal front.

Perhaps most notable is the success of the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Bill, which passed Stage 3 in April. Through our membership of the Dangerous Dogs Act Study Group the BVA has followed the journey of this Bill with great interest.

We are grateful to Alex Neil and Christine Grahame for their commitment to the issue and their understanding of the need for legislation that recognises that a dog’s behaviour is largely dictated by its training and handling, not its breed – a principle we describe as ‘deed not breed’.

We are also grateful to Patricia Ferguson for introducing an important amendment to the Bill to remove the reference to a dog’s size and power, which we feared was breed-specific legislation by another name.

I have no doubt that the success of the Control of Dogs Bill was a catalyst in the Labour Government announcing a wide-ranging consultation on dangerous dogs in March.

For many years we were told by politicians of all parties in Westminster that there was no way we would get the issue of dangerous dogs legislation on the table. By leading the debate on this controversial issue, the Scottish Parliament proved that it does not have to be avoided.
At the start of this year Professor Bateson published his report on the health and welfare aspects of dog breeding and we are pleased to be working alongside the Scottish Government through the Dog Review Board to take forward the proposals made in the three significant reports by Professor Bateson, the Associate Parliamentary Group on Animal Welfare and the RSPCA.

Partnership working on the health and welfare of dogs has been a struggle at times, but change will take a long time and so we must start getting it right now.

Dangerous dogs and breeding highlight the need for all of us to promote responsible pet ownership. We were pleased to note the publication of dog and cat welfare codes earlier this year, and particularly pleased to find that the dog code includes the need to health screen parents when considering breeding and to check that parents have been health screened when choosing a puppy.

Unfortunately these important aspects were not included in the Defra codes for England, despite representations from the veterinary profession and many organisations associated with dog welfare.

On equine welfare issues, the BVA was delighted to receive notification of the Scottish Government’s intention to amend the Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2007 to remove the exemption allowing the hot branding of equine animals.

Last year Nicky raised the veterinary professions’ profound concerns regarding the ongoing use of hot branding to identify certain horses and ponies, particularly in light of the requirement for all equids to be microchipped.

We were very pleased to note that the Government had taken account of the BVA’s position on this issue when considering the change in policy and that authorisations for hot branding were stopped, pending the consultation. We hope that an official decision will be made on this soon, which could be a perfect example of BVA policy being put into practice.

Another lobbying success for the BVA, this time in Europe, was securing an extension to the transitional arrangements under the pet travel rules, affording the UK, Ireland and three other Member States additional protection until the end of 2011.

The BVA worked very closely with Defra to lobby the European Parliament to secure this additional time to further investigate the risks posed to the UK from rabies, ticks and tapeworms.

The BVA is particularly concerned about the threat of *Echinococcus multilocularis* – a significant public health concern – and will continue to work with Defra and others to support research into these risks. Again the work of the BVA in securing the extension underlines the importance of the veterinary profession in the public good.

Which leads me neatly into a plug for the BVA’s annual Congress to be held at the Glasgow Marriott on 23rd to 25th September under the theme ‘Vets and the Public Good’.

I have already mentioned that we will be providing world-class CPD through Scotland’s finest research and academic institutions, but we will also tackle a wide range of contentious issues, some of which I’ve touched on tonight: dangerous dogs, responsibility and cost sharing, and farm animal welfare, as well as a question and answer panel with the four CVOs for the UK.

I am also very pleased to announce that Professor Stuart Reid will be delivering the Wooldridge Memorial Lecture on the topic ‘Vets and the public good: the broader perspective’. I very much hope to see many of you there.
I would just like to end this evening by saying thank you on behalf of the BVA to each of our guests and the organisations they represent. You are all our partners and I believe that the veterinary profession is the richer for it.

So I would like to ask my fellow BVA members to join me in a toast to our guests…

ENDS