My lords, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the British Veterinary Association annual London dinner.

You can’t have turned on a television or radio in recent weeks and months without hearing from our guest speaker Miss Anne McIntosh MP, chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs select committee in the House of Commons.

Between dangerous dogs, horsemeat, bovine TB vaccination, and flooding, the committee’s work cannot have failed to come into all of our spheres of interest. And so we are absolutely delighted that Miss McIntosh could be with us this evening, and I know we all very much look forward to hearing her perspective on current issues.

But before we do I would like to give the veterinary profession’s perspective on a few key topics.

The theme for my presidential year is ‘vets adding value’ and with such important issues on the table it is essential that we, as an Association, can communicate the value of veterinary opinion and veterinary input.

I’m convinced that the idea of value runs throughout everything we do because as a profession we exist to provide a service for our clients whether they are pet owners, farmers, those that benefit from animal health research, policy makers, or wider stakeholders.

In light of recent headlines you won’t be surprised to hear that I want to start off this evening by talking about food. Like many – and I hope most – of you here tonight, the BVA prides itself on a procurement policy for our events which means we are very careful and particular about the food we source for our guests, even if it costs more to do so.

But it shouldn’t just be the preserve of those that can afford it. It goes without saying that everyone has a right to know what’s in the food they eat.

The headlines about horsemeat will no doubt continue, but what is already clear is that in a very short space of time the news has undermined confidence in the food chain. And it has called into question the veracity of the horse passport system, which is clearly not fit for purpose.

We need to look ahead now and agree what we need from the passport system and how we can achieve that – for both animal and human health. We would renew our 2009 call for all horses to be microchipped – not just foals – and for a single, national equine database. These measures may not be cheap but what price can we honestly put on regaining confidence in the food chain?
Whether it is wholesale change or adapting the current system, there is no doubt that things do need to change. But we would warn against a kneejerk response across the whole food chain that could unnecessarily impact on the cost of production in the UK. While initial price rises would be borne by the retailers and consumers, as the drive for cheap food inevitably occurs, we fear that farmers could be squeezed financially with consequences for animal health and welfare. Ultimately, we need a system that works and inspires confidence without undue burden.

In all of this the role of vet is key, and it was a significant theme of the Veterinary Development Council’s report last year that veterinary surgeons in large animal practice need to demonstrate the value that they bring both to individual farmers and throughout the entire food chain. I’m absolutely convinced that we should be exploring further the role of the profession in the food chain. Who better that the vet to be an effective conduit between the retailers – who know best what their customers ask of them – and the farmer – who is responsible for rearing the animals that are the source of the food commodities that the retailers provide? Surely vets can do this just as well as food technicians.

And while Member States undertake their European-wide consideration of the integrity of the food chain we call on parliamentarians to remember our call for a Europe-wide animal welfare label. The terrible incidents of the past weeks have given us a real opportunity to get this right. To tell people exactly what they are eating and whether it has enjoyed higher welfare standards from farm to fork.

Our call for better welfare labelling was, of course, heightened during the recent debate over welfare at slaughter and our call for a ban on slaughter without stunning.

And on this issue the time is now. With European legislation on slaughter being implemented into UK law this year it provides us with a golden opportunity to rethink a system that allows meat from slaughter without stunning to enter the mainstream food chain. The fact that consumers are not allowed to know whether their meat is slaughtered in a way which severely compromises the welfare of the animals in question is simply unacceptable.

If an outright ban is not possible, because of political sensitivities, then we want to see the welfare of these animals improved, through post-cut stunning and enhanced enforcement of welfare legislation. And we want to see the demand for these products reduced through clearer labelling that would make it financially unattractive for slaughterhouses to supply meat from non-stun slaughter into the secular market.

Food labelling is a complicated issue dealt with at a European level, but now is the time for us to talk about it a great deal more, and here in the UK we should see welfare labelling as an opportunity as consumers place a higher value on higher welfare produce.

The integrity of our food chain also relies on our strong surveillance capacity.

I’d like to thank Anne McIntosh and her colleagues on EfraCom for their work on surveillance and their very quick response to the concerns raised by BVA – and others – following the proposed ‘rationalisation’ of the laboratory network in England and Wales.

This time last year the Committee wrote to Defra echoing many of the issues we had raised in our evidence – the need for full consultation, the loss of key specialist skills, and – crucially – the impact on our ability to identify new and emerging disease threats.

It is true that our confidence in AHVLA was shaken by the abrupt announcement and what we felt was a failure to consult. But much has changed in the past year and we are now fully engaged with the Surveillance 2014 consultation.

There is much in the current system that our members – and of course the farming industry – value: the close relationship between private practitioners and Veterinary Investigation Officers; local
networks; and the provision of an early warning system. It is essential that these elements are not lost as the plans progress.

Ultimately, we need a system that maintains the current high level of quality and that can respond effectively to disease threats. Threats that are on the rise with increasing movements of people and animals across the globe, and the consequences of a changing climate.

The emergence of Schmallenberg virus in the UK early last year – and the arrival of Bluetongue before it – provide us with perfect examples of the need for robust surveillance systems, excellent research facilities, and an understanding of the risks involved in sourcing animals.

Schmallenberg is a good example where we seem to lack the means to deal with transitioning diseases. Given that we now have Surveillance 2014, the current economic climate, and the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy up for review next year, there is no better time to look at models for control of disease than right now.

Yes, we recognise the need for financial savings but at what cost?

Any impact on our future capacity to deliver effective scanning surveillance is surely a false economy.

During the inquiry, EfraCom also considered the thorny issue of tendering for Official Veterinarian (or OV) services, such as TB testing, where the BVA has long argued for a professional fee for professional services in recognition of the value of vets carrying out these essential tasks on farm.

BVA and AHVLA had reached an impasse and we are grateful for the interventions of both EfraCom and the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England on this issue.

I’m very pleased to say that the BVA has been developing an excellent working relationship with the Board and I’m delighted to welcome Michael Seals, Tim Morris, and Mark Tufnell this evening. I do believe that the Board recognises the value of vets and understands what we at BVA want to achieve.

On OV services, I believe the Board supports our view that tendering is not the answer and that open tendering for services at an individual practice level could cause tremendous damage to veterinary practice infrastructure, with wider implications for TB testing, surveillance, and contingency in the future.

We’ve made the case for a concept that finds efficiency right across the board and ensures the involvement of all practitioners, should they wish to engage with a more modern system. And this connects directly with what I said earlier about the pivotal role of the vet in helping to assure the quality of the food chain in a continuum from pre-harvest right through to the retail outlet. We lose the value of this fundamental veterinary input at our peril.

Now we need to hear from AHVLA. We need firm proposals that our members can discuss. And we need to give practices time to make a choice about how a new system could work for their business. They are indeed small businesses, and should be afforded the benefits of Government commitments to support small and medium sized businesses.

In carrying out TB tests vets are at the forefront of our daily battle against bovine TB. But we know that testing and movement restrictions sadly aren’t enough.

BVA has made our position on TB very clear. The science hasn’t changed and we continue to support the use of all the tools in the toolbox, including tackling the wildlife reservoir through targeted, humane badger culling.
We also warmly welcomed the EfraCom inquiry on vaccination and tomorrow the BVA and our cattle division BCVA will be giving oral evidence to the Committee on the issues primarily surrounding vaccination for bovine TB (along with a discussion on the Schmallenberg outbreak).

Our team will express the importance of developing effective vaccines for cattle and badgers to be used in the control and eventual eradication of bTB in the national cattle herd, but also impressing the challenges that lie ahead to achieve this.

The inquiry report will be essential in helping to ensure the realities of badger and cattle vaccination programmes are understood and communicated. And that, for me, has been the major problem.

The waters have repeatedly been muddied as organisations opposed to the badger cull exaggerated the role that cattle and badger vaccination could play. And so we were grateful to European Commissioner Tonio Borg for clarifying the timetable for a cattle vaccine earlier this year and setting out a series of steps that would mean a cattle vaccine for bovine TB is unlikely to be commercially available until 2023. Can we afford to sit around and wait till then and do nothing? I don’t think so.

This year we are expecting the proposals for new medicines legislation from Brussels and we are bracing ourselves to challenge any proposals that would fundamentally alter the way we prescribe and dispense medicines to our clients.

Moves in Europe towards what is known as ‘decoupling’ – essentially removing a vet’s right to dispense the drugs that he/she prescribes – completely undermine our status as respected professionals, and ignore the work we have been doing to actively promote the responsible use of medicines – particularly antimicrobials, and to work within a robust ethical framework.

I’m grateful for the assurances from our VMD colleagues that they continue to argue these points in the different forums in Brussels where they meet, as we do through the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe. And I make a plea that everyone in Defra from the CVO downwards lobbies hard at the Commission that it not be influenced by this call for decoupling.

Back in the UK we are looking forward to the five-year strategy on antimicrobials, which is a joint initiative from the Department of Health and Defra. We are increasingly on the receiving end of much finger-pointing over our use of antimicrobials – including during a recent parliamentary debate on the issue – and so we hope, and expect, that the report will support the current scientific view that the problem of antibiotic resistance is primarily the result of over-prescribing & inappropriate use in human medicine.

But it’s unhelpful to get into a blame game and we want to work with the medical profession to both preach and practise responsible use in all fields.

Just to add that last year we successfully lobbied our regulator – the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons – to include the responsible use of medicines in our Code of Professional Conduct, which was being updated.

The Code’s guidance now states that we MUST be seen to ensure that we use antimicrobials responsibly and I believe that sends a very important message.

We are a small profession, but our impact is significant in both animal and human health. And now we are growing… In October the University of Surrey announced plans to open a new veterinary school in 2014, which would take our total up to eight in the UK.

Our members are very concerned about the impact of yet more UK graduates, not only because of the additional pressure it will put on the employment prospects of individual graduates, but also because of the impact it will have on the availability of practical training opportunities, in other words...
EMS, with practices to train the additional students, and the impact it could have on the ability of all veterinary schools to provide high quality teaching staff.

I’ve since met with representatives of the University and have been impressed by their plans for excellent facilities as well as their focus on veterinary business skills, but the wider concerns remain unanswered, particularly if our fears of other universities starting up new vet schools are proved right.

Of course, market forces will dictate whether or not new schools are established. But the Government does have a role to play in funding these places and we would question whether an endless intake of vet undergraduates into new schools can really be sustainable.

Let me turn to companion animals. And what a busy time it has been. Particularly in relation to dogs where we have had a raft of reviews, reports, inquiries, and now government policy announcements.

Most recently the Government announced the long-awaited changes to the Dangerous Dogs Act – a woefully inadequate piece of legislation that we – and others – started to campaign against almost as soon as the ink was dry in the statute books back in 1991.

We have consistently argued that a breed-specific approach to controlling dogs is flawed, because any dog has the ability to be ‘dangerous’ in the wrong hands. We have to look at the other end of the lead and deal with the irresponsible owners of any breed or type.

And we need a preventive approach; not one that relies on a terrible incident happening before the police can step in.

And so the Government’s recent announcement that law be tweaked to cover private property and to allow the police some discretion over seizure of dogs is welcome but doesn’t go nearly far enough.

We’re pleased that in the EfraCom report earlier this month MPs supported a preventive approach, and particularly the concept of Dog Control Notices, and we hope the Government will now listen to the united call for these changes.

The announcement on dangerous dogs was part of a bigger package of measures including the compulsory microchipping of all dogs.

This is a huge victory for the BVA and the many organisations that make up the Microchipping Alliance, chaired so very ably by the Dogs Trust. Microchipping is an essential part of responsible ownership but it’s primarily a welfare issue. Compulsory chipping will make a huge difference to our ability to reunite lost and stray dogs with their owners – saving charities and local authorities millions of pounds.

The welfare of dogs is a daily rollercoaster for veterinary surgeons in small animal practice – from the highs of puppy socialisation classes and preventive healthcare to the lows of desperately ill puppy-farmed pets bought in a lay-by and owners that have made a fashionable purchase that doesn’t suit their lifestyle.

We must find ways to put an end to these ill-advised purchases.

And that is why our charity, the Animal Welfare Foundation, and the RSPCA launched the puppy contract and puppy information pack – designed to ensure potential owners ask the right questions and demand the right information before they buy.
We are grateful to both Defra and the Efra Committee for their support for the puppy contract. When it was launched last year it gained the support of almost all of the major dog welfare organisations. And when it is reviewed this year we very much hope that we can bring everyone on board.

The key to tackling those ill-advised purchases is education so wouldn't it be great if we could all sing from the same hymn sheet?

We need a reduction in the threshold for licensing breeders and we need local authorities to commit the time and resources to enforcing legislation, with veterinary input.

We also need to look again at the enforcement of pet travel rules as vets across the country are reporting serious concerns about animals of unknown origin coming into their practices. The reported 400% rise in pet travel movements since the change in the rules suggests that people are exploiting the non-commercial routes for commercial gain.

While the changes to the pet travel regulations were shown to keep our disease risk low, we are now witnessing the unintended consequence of large numbers of puppies being brought from eastern Europe to be sold in the UK.

And we do have grave concerns for the welfare of those puppies.

Perhaps it’s a seed that we can plant in the minds of the Efra Committee members as they think about the next big topic to tackle… I’ll leave the Chair with that thought.

And so to finish I’d like to thank you all again for joining us this evening and for your ongoing support for the veterinary profession in the UK.

In political terms we're halfway through this Government and I think the veterinary profession – with a strong lead from the BVA – is bringing real value to the policy-making process and having an impact on the decisions being made. Of course we don’t expect to get everything we want, but we won’t be put off trying and we embrace the opportunities to contribute the scientific and evidence-based veterinary viewpoint.

I’d now like to very warmly welcome Anne McIntosh MP, Chair of the Efra Select Committee.

Thank you…