Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the British Veterinary Association’s annual Northern Ireland dinner.

I’d like to start by thanking our kind host Kieran McCarthy for making it possible for us to invite you all here to this magnificent building this evening.

And I’d like to thank you all for taking the time to show your support for the veterinary profession and the BVA.

DARD Minister Michelle O’Neill had hoped to join us this evening but I’m afraid a diary clash has meant that she is unable to attend.

However, earlier today we met with her to discuss some of the issues we’ll be talking about this evening and we took the opportunity to stress the importance of the veterinary profession in achieving many of her Department’s objectives.

So I’m absolutely delighted to welcome Chief Veterinary Officer Bert Houston who has very kindly agreed to deliver the Minister’s speech on her behalf, to inform us all about the current thinking in DARD.

As most of you will know Bert will soon be retiring and his loss will be felt enormously, not only by his immediate colleagues in the Department, but also by the veterinary profession across the north and south and over in GB, by the wider agricultural and animal health and welfare communities, and by all of us at the BVA.

The BVA and local veterinary associations have enjoyed a truly excellent relationship with you, Bert, and you have always been a true champion for our profession in government.

I’d like to take the opportunity to wish you all the best on behalf of all of our members.

Before we hear from Bert I’d like to outline a few of the issues of interest and concern to our members in Northern Ireland and across the UK.

When I became BVA President just two weeks ago I announced that my theme for the year would be trust.

As veterinary professionals we are afforded a certain status in society.

It is the direct result of generations of veterinary surgeons being entrusted with the lives of people’s well-loved pets and prized livestock.

And we follow in a long line of vets who could always be trusted to take an honest, practical and scientific approach to any scenario.
The importance of the relationship between an animal owner and his/her vet should never be underestimated. That is why we feel so strongly that vets must be at the heart of current initiatives to significantly expand the local food sector.

We warmly welcome the publication of the Agri-Food Strategy Board’s report ‘Going for Growth, Investing in Success’ which sets out ambitious targets for strengthening Northern Ireland’s world-class food supply chain.

It couldn’t have come at a better time given the extraordinary challenges our livestock keepers have faced over the past 12 months, most notably the terrible spring weather that resulted in such devastating losses.

We are pleased to see that the key recommendations of ‘Going for Growth’ include the need to eliminate animal disease, to double the drawdown of European funding for agri-food innovation, and to promote the USP of improved animal health, welfare and biosecurity.

Yes, it’s ambitious. But it’s also achievable as long as we have a strong network of veterinary practices and a commitment to veterinary-led research.

Vets play a pivotal role in the management of animal health and welfare and in programmes to eradicate disease because they are the trusted advisers of farmers and producers.

‘Going for Growth’ sets out a clear roadmap for increasing productivity and growing the marketshare for ‘NI PLC’. But it can only be achieved if there is a commitment throughout the single supply chain to high standards of animal, and public, health to provide the necessary assurances to the global market.

We’re under no illusion that any of this is easy. And despite decades of building trust in our food chain we know from the horsemeat scandal that it can be lost all too easily.

When news of mislabelled meat hit the headlines earlier this year it sent shockwaves throughout Europe. Here in Northern Ireland the discovery of horsemeat labelled as beef in a cold store called into question the trust that consumers had placed in food producers and retailers.

Political leaders in the Department and the Assembly moved quickly to establish the facts and reassure the public that beef produced in Northern Ireland is of the highest quality.

Amidst alarmist headlines BVA worked hard to get the right messages out to both vets and the public.

And when the question of phenylbutazone residues entered the story we were called upon by the national media to put the risk into context and reassure worried consumers.

A phrase I heard at a meeting recently, and which I used in my inaugural speech last month, couldn’t be more apt:
“Trust arrives on foot, and leaves on horseback.”

It will take time to rebuild confidence, and it will take action at European and UK levels, but there is no doubt in my mind that it can be rebuilt if we all continue to work in partnership.

It is this partnership approach that will ensure the success of the Animal Health and Welfare NI’s programme to eradicate bovine viral diarrhoea, and work towards the eradication of Johne’s disease. It is a partnership that spans government and industry, as well as the north/south border, as it embraces an all-island approach to disease eradication to ensure that knowledge and expertise is shared for the benefit of all.
Through our members on the ground BVA is firmly behind these programmes and we have communicated our strong support for the next phase of the BVD eradication programme to include compulsory testing. We hope that the groundswell of opinion from industry and the profession will help the Minister to introduce the necessary legislation at the earliest opportunity.

In my early career I did dairy practice, and the identification of BVD as a cause of reproductive problems on one of our larger units did a lot for my confidence and credibility as a young vet.

The ongoing battle against endemic disease frustrates vets and farmers on a daily basis. We are constantly chasing to keep up and so we must seize this opportunity for the future health and welfare of the national herd to allow us to fully exploit its export potential.

Getting on top of production animal disease means better health, better welfare, and increased productivity.

But we need all of the available tools to secure better animal health, and that means ongoing access to veterinary medicines, particularly antimicrobials.

The global threat of antibiotic resistance has shone a spotlight on the use of these vital medicines in both the human and animal sectors, and led to calls for the restriction of their use on farms.

BVA has long championed the message of responsible use of antimicrobials and anthelmintics, but we can only do so much. We need more funding for research and support for the development pipeline for new antimicrobials.

Last month we welcomed the publication of the UK’s Five-Year Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy, jointly produced by Defra, the Department of Health, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Scottish and Welsh Governments.

It recognised the need for research and development alongside responsible use, and enshrined the concept of the ‘One Health’ approach – human and veterinary medical professionals working towards the same goal.

Successful disease management and eradication also involves good biosecurity and earlier this year the BVA supported the roll out of DARD’s statutory biosecurity guidance as we reach the home straight in the eradication of brucellosis.

It is a sensible and logical step to ensure Northern Ireland stays on track to achieve disease-free status by 2015.

And it is testament to you and your team Bert that the eradication of another disease is in your sights, following the achievement of Aujeszky’s disease-free status last year. By building trusting relationships with industry and private veterinary practitioners, the Department has been able to roll out its eradication programmes successfully.

But these relationships must never be taken for granted. The role of private vets as trusted sources of advice for farmers in endemic disease control programmes must not be lost in the rush to make cost savings.

In Great Britain the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (or AHVLA) has been developing a model for procuring the services of Official Veterinarians (or OVs – private vets that undertake work on behalf of the government).
While we still do not accept the need for a system of tendering we are pleased that AHVLA has taken on board our call for the importance of local veterinary practices to be recognised in such a system.

But we don’t yet know how this will work in practice and we remain sceptical that the risk of unintended consequences has been addressed.

We lose our network of local veterinary practices at our peril. It’s a network that provides vital services to the rural economy and a first line of defence in the face of disease.

The recent debate on the use of lay TB testers highlights the same issues, and BVA’s national policy recognises the concerns of members in Northern Ireland. Namely the impact on vet-to-farm contact time and a reduction in the number of veterinary surgeons available for out of hours work and contingency in the event of a disease outbreak.

These are real and practical considerations that must be taken into account by policymakers.

On the wider TB policy BVA acknowledges the high level of political interest from both the Department and members of the Assembly, and in particular members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee.

Just after our annual dinner last year the ARD Committee published its wide-ranging review of bovine TB policy making a number of recommendations and calling for urgency in tackling the disease.

This call for urgency is one that the BVA wholeheartedly echoes, and we recognise the frustration from vets, farmers, and politicians alike at the slow pace of change to the national disease picture.

But after many years of lobbying we are pleased that there is now widespread recognition that bovine TB cannot be eradicated without a commitment to tackling the disease in wildlife.

DARD’s policy of wildlife intervention research to test and vaccinate or remove badgers (TVR) is an attractive one, and the work will provide essential information to inform TB policy across the whole of the UK.

We echo the call for farmers to give the necessary permissions to allow the badger sett surveys to go ahead in County Down when they re-commence in the winter. A high level of cooperation will be needed to ensure essential data can be gathered.

And we welcome the Minister’s announcement last month that a government and industry strategic partnership will be established to develop a long-term strategy towards eradication of bovine TB in Northern Ireland.

I must stress the need to involve veterinary practitioners in the development of the strategy. It will provide a much-needed clear framework but it must be flexible enough to take into account the results of the TVR project.

We cannot pre-judge the work of the strategic partnership but one thing is clear – the successful eradication of TB can only be achieved with a holistic policy that gives vets and farmers access to all of the available tools.

Underpinning any disease eradication strategy is the availability of robust scientific research.
As I highlighted earlier ‘Going for Growth’ recognised the need for increased European funding for agri-food research and we appreciate the Minister’s recent efforts to showcase the work of AFBI (the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute) – Northern Ireland’s leading provider of scientific research – in Europe.

Ongoing investment in R&D in the UK is vital and efforts to secure funding for our institutions will have the full support of the BVA.

Of course much of the UK and Ireland’s world-class veterinary research originates in our eight veterinary schools.

And as that number is set to increase, with the recent announcement of a new veterinary school at the University of Surrey, the BVA is engaging in a serious dialogue with our members on the future of the UK veterinary workforce.

We understand that the University of Ulster is canvassing the views of the profession in Northern Ireland on the prospect of opening its own veterinary school, and similar discussions are rumoured in Wales – the only other part of the UK without a (vet) school.

The attractiveness of a home-grown veterinary school is clear to see, but the message we are receiving from our members is mixed.

On the one hand our members welcome the ability for school leavers to attend a nearby university – particularly in Northern Ireland where the tuition fees at British universities and the additional travel and accommodation costs may disadvantage NI students – and they are encouraged by the prospect of a local centre of excellence for veterinary research.

But on the other hand we recognise the impact that a glut of veterinary graduates could have in saturating the market.

Figures from the RCVS reveal that we don’t currently experience an oversupply of vets in the UK, but we are moving rapidly in one direction with the prospect of new veterinary schools and the expanding intake at some of the existing schools.

Later this month BVA is hosting a veterinary education forum bringing together all of the voices in the debate. It’s not within BVA’s power to determine the number of veterinary schools in the UK, but it is our job to make sure decisions are being made by those who are fully aware of the facts and potential consequences.

The expansion of places on veterinary degree courses will mean more bright school leavers can take the next step on their chosen career path, but it will also mean that they will need to be much more flexible in their careers.

Ultimately we must ensure that tomorrow’s students have realistic expectations about their future employment prospects. One of the key elements of BVA’s Careers Fair, launched at the London Vet Show last year and going into its second year at the Show this November, is to open up the possibility of alternative veterinary careers to a life in practice.

But, we know that most graduates will seek to enter mixed practice in their first role and the majority will then go into small animal practice. And so the health and welfare of pet animals remains a major priority for BVA.

An ongoing issue of concern is the role that vets can play in ensuring responsible pet ownership. The likelihood is that those owners we get to see will be the most receptive to messages about improving health and welfare, but after almost three decades in small animal practice I can tell you that it isn’t always easy.
We need a concerted effort to educate people on how to source pet animals responsibly and how to fulfil their duty to provide for the five welfare needs enshrined in the Welfare of Animals Act.

The Act has provided a welcome focus for many of positive messages about animal health and welfare, as well as legislative measures to improve the welfare of pet animals.

Earlier this year the ban on tail docking of puppies came into force. Whilst the BVA wanted to see a full ban, without exemptions, we are pleased that this does provide a step forward.

But the exemption for working breeds is wide and I would appeal to my colleagues in practice to be aware of the potential for the law to be abused. We must send a strong message that the cosmetic docking of a dog’s tail is unacceptable.

Also this year we welcomed the new dog breeding regulations that came into force in April. Although we hoped they would go further with regard to health testing, the regulations provide a useful framework to crackdown on irresponsible breeding on a larger scale.

Supply is fuelled by demand and we must all take responsibility for educating potential puppy buyers.

We were therefore grateful to the Minister for her strong but simple message when launching the new regulations that buyers should always insist on seeing a puppy with its mother.

This message is enshrined in everything we do on dog health and welfare, where vets have a key role to play in advising the puppy-buying public.

To that end BVA is involved in a number of initiatives with the major dog welfare charities to provide consistent advice.

Sadly, the sale of animals on the internet has fed into the idea that a new pet is just one click away. And so the BVA is a member of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (or PAAG), which recently launched a set of minimum standards for websites to demonstrate that they take the welfare of animals for sale seriously.

PAAG has been working with Gumtree and the other major classified sites to help get the mechanisms in place to quickly remove any adverts that fall short of these standards.

With thousands of adverts posted regularly it’s no easy task, and we would appreciate political support from DARD and others for this initiative.

As consumers, we need to be able to trust that what we see advertised online is what we’ll get. The best way to do that is to empower new owners to ask the right questions.

At last year’s dinner Peter highlighted the puppy contract and puppy information pack which are designed to do just that. The contract and PIP were developed by our charity, the Animal Welfare Foundation, and the RSPCA using legal, veterinary, and animal behaviour expertise.

The contract is now being reviewed following feedback from the past year and we will look to relaunch it in the new year. Again, we hope to secure political support for the contract to ensure as many people as possible to ask the right questions before buying a new puppy.

We need to encourage people to think twice before making an impulse buy of any pet. To think about where the animal is from, the conditions in which it was bred, and whether its health and welfare needs can be provided for.
And just as vets provide trusted advice to farmers before new livestock is brought onto the farm, we want to encourage pet owners to see their vet as the place to go for advice before bringing a new pet into the home.

Before I end tonight I’d like to pay tribute to my colleagues who worked towards the formation of BVA’s Northern Ireland Branch, which was formally adopted into our Articles of Association at last month’s AGM.

As I hope you will have noted from this speech, the veterinary profession has a lot to say about a wide range of critical animal health and welfare issues, and the formation of the BVA Northern Ireland Branch builds on the excellent history of local veterinary associations working together to represent the profession.

Under the presidency of Sandra Dunbar the Branch will ensure that we can fully represent our members in Northern Ireland from across all areas of expertise within the profession.

I cannot let this moment pass without paying huge tribute to Des Thompson who stood down as chairman of VetNI earlier this year after too many years of service to the veterinary profession to count.

He was instrumental in the setting up of VetNI and the profile on his practice website tells us that there are few veterinary organisations that Des has not been president of. The trust that exists between the veterinary profession and government is thanks in large part to Des and he will be much missed at the helm.

And so, before I hand over to Bert Houston to deliver his speech on behalf of DARD I would like to thank you all again for joining us this evening and for your ongoing support for BVA and the veterinary profession.

I’d like to ask my fellow BVA members to join me in a toast to our guests.

*TOAST*

Thank you