Speech to the BVA annual Welsh Dinner

Peter Harlech Jones, President of the British Veterinary Association

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~ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~

Boneddigesau and boneddigion

Mae gyda chryn balchder ac anrhyydedd yr wyf yn sefyll yma och blaen heno yn y ganolfan ddinesig wych yma yn ein prifddinas, Caerdydd. Neis i byth gredu yr holl flynyddoedd yn ôl pan y graddiais o ysgol milfeddygol yn Lerpwl y byddwn fel llywydd y gymdeithas y BVA yn anerch gwesteion mor nodedig ac enwog, ac yr wyf wrth fy modd, felly, i estyn croeso cynnes i chi pawb i’r cinio Gymraeg blynyddol y Gymdeithas; mae’r profiad yn un gostyngedig.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with huge pride and with real humility that I stand before you in this wonderful civic centre in our capital city. Little did I think all those years ago when I graduated from that most excellent of vet schools at the University of Liverpool that I would, as president of the British Veterinary Association, be speaking to such a distinguished group of guests, and so I am really delighted to welcome you all to the annual Welsh dinner of the BVA here in Cardiff. I’m particularly pleased that a dear friend who played a very important part in helping me along the way is here tonight. I first saw practice with Huw Geraint Williams and his partners in Chwilog near Pwllheli all those years ago and then went to work for him for a spell after graduating, so it’s great that my first boss is here. He keeps telling me that it was no surprise that I didn’t stay in large animal practice because I was useless at getting up at night to go to calls. It’s ironic in a way that in this role now it’s quite hard to even get to bed sometimes!!

Before I get into the main issues this evening I’d like to say a few words of congratulations and thanks.

Firstly to Rob Davies who, as many of you know, has today become President of BVA Welsh Branch. Rob has been a fantastic junior vice president for the past two years and we know he will be a tremendous advocate for our profession in Wales and we wish him all the very best for a successful presidency.

Congratulations also to Neil Paton who takes on the baton as junior vice president and brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the team.

And an enormous, heartfelt thank you to Bob Stevenson who completed his presidential term today. Bob reigned veterinary politics in Wales as the inaugural president of BVA Welsh Branch two years ago and we are sincerely grateful for everything he has done and achieved in that time.
Finally, I’d like to formally state BVA’s congratulations to our guest speaker Alun Davies for his appointment as Minister for Natural Resources and Food earlier this year. We are absolutely delighted that you could join us this evening, Minister, for your first annual BVA dinner and we very much look forward to hearing your perspective on some of the key issues facing the veterinary profession in Wales and the UK.

**THEME**

The theme for my presidential year is ‘vets adding value’ and I’m particularly proud to be flying that flag here in Wales, where we have a reputation and tradition of providing veterinary expertise and input at every level from pets in the home to livestock on the hills, and from research laboratories and abattoirs to policy making and legislation.

Across society veterinary surgeons are recognised for the value they can bring to animal health and welfare and public health; all for the public good. But most members of the public think of vets in the image of James Herriot – in the consulting room or on the farm – and that image, while being hugely respected, misses some of the vital roles carried out by vets today.

My own career in pharmaceutical research and European regulatory affairs certainly doesn’t fit the Herriot image.

And neither do our colleagues in academia and our government vets. But they are an essential piece of the jigsaw that safeguards animal health and welfare through disease surveillance.

**AHVLA FUTURE**

And so, as the role of AHVLA post-2015 is being reviewed in Wales, we want – and need – to be a part of that conversation. Our members working in AHVLA, as well as our members in private practice, are best placed to input into those decisions from the frontline.

The working relationship between government and private vets is crucial, particularly in the fight against bovine TB.

**CYMORTH TB**

BVA has long supported the concept of private vets being given an enhanced role in the work they carry out on behalf of government as Official Veterinarians (or OVs). As part of that process our cattle division BCVA has been developing a new initiative - ‘Cymorth TB’ - with Welsh Government and AHVLA to pilot a TB support scheme delivered to farmers by private vets in six cluster areas.

Through the scheme OVs will be able to demonstrate their added value to farms in helping to reduce the risk of TB and to support farmers with business continuity in the face of a breakdown.

The success of the project will be in good communication: between Welsh Government and vets – both private and AHVLA; and between OVs and farmers.

The training starts this month and I would urge vets in the cluster areas to volunteer for this exciting project, which could revolutionise the role of OVs in Wales and, ultimately, across the UK.

**TB POLICY**

It is this new way of thinking about TB that is shaping policy in Wales.

BVA’s own policy on bovine TB remains that we need all the tools in the toolbox to get on top of the disease, and that must include targeted, humane culling of badgers in certain circumstances, as
well as strong cattle measures and vaccination both of badgers and cattle when the latter becomes available some years down the road.

But we do appreciate the investment of time and resources being made by Welsh Government to enhance our understanding of the disease. Veterinary research and knowledge is at the heart of progress and so I must acknowledge and applaud the work of CVO Christianne Glossop and her recent initiatives including the TB expert forum at the end of last year and her fact-finding visit to Ethiopia in February. BVA recognises the value of the work being done here in Wales and will continue to support you and work with you.

Along with data and information from the vaccination project in the Intensive Action Area, these initiatives will add to our knowledge base and ultimately assist us in our goal of achieving a TB-free UK.

FARMING CONNECT/KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Shared knowledge is a central pillar of disease control and eradication following Gareth Williams’ Working Smarter recommendation. And I’m pleased that vets are taking up the opportunities afforded by the Farming Connect mentoring scheme to offer supported farm health planning and disease investigation services to farmers.

Through Farming Connect and the various initiatives in the Rural Development Plan for Wales, the veterinary profession has the best opportunity to transfer knowledge and promote best practice on medicine use, animal welfare monitoring, and improving efficiency – all of which add value for money to individual clients and government.

DISEASE PRIORITIES

Part of that process is taking a whole farm approach encompassing disease and performance and we are very supportive of the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy Steering Group’s identification of non-statutory disease priorities in cattle and sheep.

This allows Welsh Government, working with industry and the veterinary profession, to map out a future for disease control and eradication. Initiatives on sheep scab and BVD are particularly welcome. And when I delivered my speech at our annual Scottish dinner last month I congratulated them on the work they had done collectively on BVD eradication and said how pleased I was that Wales was treading the same path. The benefits of eradication of these livestock diseases will far outweigh the costs.

LIVER FLUKE

I understand that last autumn liver fluke was added to the priority list for dairy, meaning it now seen as a priority across all three sectors of dairy, beef and sheep.

The situation is critical and liver fluke is posing the most serious challenge yet as the recent wet weather conditions have provided such an ideal environment for this parasite to thrive.

The lack of availability of flukicidal products is a cause for concern across the whole of the UK, but it is our members in Wales and Scotland who have sounded the alarm bells most vigorously.

And as I said to colleagues in Scotland last month, we are looking to the regulator – the Veterinary Medicines Directorate – to find solutions that will allow us to fast track the licensing of more flukicides without the companies necessarily having to have the full dossier of data available, and to consider whatever means possible to allow products to be used in dairy animals with withdrawal periods that can be practically implemented and adhered to.
Such moves would provide vets and farmers with desperately needed tools to fight this devastating
disease, whilst still ensuring safety and efficacy.

**RESISTANCE**

While the problem of resistance has reached crisis point with liver fluke, the threat of antimicrobial
and anthelmintic resistance looms large across the whole of veterinary medicine.

It is a threat that we take very seriously.

The BVA and our specialist divisions preach the strong message of responsible use and work with
the farming community and other stakeholders to share knowledge and best practice on
antimicrobial and anthelmintic use.

It is frustrating therefore that the finger of blame for human antimicrobial resistance often points at
the veterinary use of these medicines, 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 in the
human sector, and re-iterated this again in a meeting in the House of Commons only last month.

We were also pleased that UK ministers used the recent G8 meeting to focus attention on the global
challenge of antibiotic resistance but were disappointed to see headlines trotting out the same
unfounded accusations against the livestock industry.

It is these inaccurate headlines that put pressure on politicians to “do something” resulting in
measures that seek to restrict the veterinary surgeon’s right to prescribe and dispense
antimicrobials, despite the current scientific view.

Throughout the UK we preach and practise responsible use of these vital medicines for the good of
animals and humans, and will continue the campaign both here and in Brussels.

**SBV**

The idea of fast tracking an authorisation procedure by the VMD is not new and it 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, but with a
vaccine now available farmers can better plan how to protect their flocks and herds from this
disease. We understand the frustration that it has come onto the market just a little too late in the
season but it is another tool at our disposal and good veterinary advice will be essential in deciding
how, where and when to use the vaccine to protect animals and their offspring.

**SURVEILLANCE**

As we said last year the emergence of a new disease also underlines the vital importance of a
robust veterinary surveillance scheme. And it’s far from ideal to have to review our veterinary
surveillance capabilities at a time when budgets need to be cut – a huge challenge for all four
administrations of the UK right now.

BVA has been involved in responding to the Surveillance 2014 project both in Wales and in
England. And our message is clear – any changes to our surveillance system must be driven by
improvements to delivery mechanisms and not simply a cost cutting measure.
Surveillance systems must also embrace veterinary practitioners. The farmer, private vet, laboratory vet triad is the cornerstone of early detection.

The number of new disease challenges to the livestock sector in recent years has been unprecedented – Schmallenberg, bluetongue, bleeding calf syndrome, and the return of bovine psoroptic mange are just some examples.

Wales has an excellent history of effective disease surveillance and we mustn’t lose that.

**HORSEMEAT**

Veterinary surveillance in abattoirs also plays a key role in securing the foodchain.

When the horsemeat scandal hit earlier this year it very quickly became clear that the value people place on the integrity of their food cannot be underestimated.

We have been working with our equine division BEVA to reiterate our calls for an overhaul of the failed horse passport system, and we are pleased that this position was supported by the European Commission.

Surveys of various groups within the equine industry undertaken by BEVA revealed some very worrying results with the Equine Sector Council concluding that they found a “catalogue of misunderstanding, patchy compliance, lack of enforcement, and a struggling system without controls or consequences”.

Equine identification is something that we have to get right. Not just so we don’t encounter another horsemeat scandal but also to help us get to grips with the terrible problem of fly grazing and horse abandonment, which has proved an enormous challenge for a number of communities in Wales.

**WELFARE AT SLAUGHTER**

The integrity of our food is something in which we all have a vested interest.

Our commitment to animal welfare and the Farm Animal Welfare Committee’s concept of a life worth living is why the BVA has long championed a Europe-wide animal welfare food label.

The issue of labelling has also been an integral part of our campaign to reduce the harm caused by slaughter without stunning, and our serious concern that animals slaughtered without pre-stunning for religious purposes are entering the secular market.

Ultimately, the BVA wants to see all animals stunned before slaughter.

But we were very grateful to your predecessor, Minister, for his commitment to look at this issue from an animal welfare point of view. We appreciate Welsh Government’s consideration of ways in which meat from non-stunned slaughter could be restricted to those communities for which it is intended and ways in which the welfare harm could be reduced, through post-cut stunning and mandatory veterinary presence, and we look forward to hearing how these plans are progressing.

**LIVESTOCK SHOWS**

But, as I said earlier, our concern is for animal welfare from birth to death and as we approach the Royal Welsh Show I am delighted to promote the new livestock show welfare plan that has been drawn up by the Association of Show and Agricultural Organisations with input from BVA.
The welfare plan again encourages added value from the show vet by ensuring that show organisers have taken all appropriate steps to safeguard the welfare of animals at the event.

Our shows are the shop window for our industry and so we must use them to demonstrate both the good health and good welfare standards that Welsh and British livestock embodies. It is a voluntary scheme and we want to encourage all shows, including the smaller ones, to embrace the principles we are aiming to promote here.

**CIRCUSES**

But we must remember that it's not always appropriate to put animals on show, and I am of course referring to the BVA's support for a ban on wild animals in travelling circuses.

The welfare needs of non-domesticated, wild animals simply cannot be met within the environment of a travelling circus, particularly in terms of accommodation and the need to express normal behaviour.

I was very pleased to note earlier this year that the Welsh Government has indicated to Defra that Wales would be interested in being a part of legislation formed in Westminster to introduce a ban and we very much hope that will be the case.

On so many animal welfare issues a coordinated approach by the four parts of the UK helps to ensure that problems aren't simply exported across the border.

**DOG CONTROL**

And more recently Welsh Government has indicated that it will work with Westminster on dog control measures.

When the announcement was made we expressed serious reservations. We believe that the Welsh Government’s earlier approach, as outlined in the draft Control of Dogs Bill, had taken on board the expertise of vets, behaviourists, dog welfare charities and enforcement agencies.

We felt that Wales could be a beacon of best practice in dog control and so we were disappointed that the proposed Dog Control Notices to embrace a more preventive approach and focus on responsible ownership would be lost.

But we believe that Wales can and should be the driver for change in Westminster. The legislation is currently being considered at committee stage and we would strongly support Welsh Government making the case for Dog Control Notices to be put back into the plans.

**MICROCHIPPING**

Whatever happens, the dog control measures will form part of the overall Dog Roadmap and I would like to commend Welsh Government on this holistic approach.

An important element of the Roadmap will be the introduction of compulsory microchipping of all dogs from March 2015, which will provide a significant boost to dog welfare by ensuring lost and stray dogs can be reunited quickly with their owners.

Vets in Wales are prepared to make it happen and are already talking to clients to encourage them to get ahead of the legislation.
A fundamental element in ensuring the success of the policy will be in the communication with dog owners. Vets, charities and government need to stress the need for microchipping and registration on one of the UK databases.

Microchipping is a safe and effective way to link a dog to its owner, but it is useless without up to date information on the database.

**DOG BREEDING**

Another integral part of the Dog Roadmap is the proposed legislation to introduce dog breeding regulations.

BVA and our small animal division BSAVA were pleased to be able to input the veterinary viewpoint to the Task and Finish Group that kick started the review of legislation a few years ago.

We know it has been a contentious issue with strong lobbying from both ends of the spectrum, but we must start somewhere and we believe that the proposals will strengthen the welfare of dogs, bitches and puppies in breeding establishments.

It is vital that Wales tackles its unenviable reputation for puppy farming and so we support the introduction of new regulations as soon as possible.

**INTERNET PET ADVERTISING**

Whatever happens we mustn’t ignore the fact that the explosion of internet shopping has had a significant impact on the purchase of puppies so we must also have a combined and concerted approach to education and public awareness from vets, the charities and government to help people make the right choices when buying or rehoming a pet.

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 review. We would be delighted if Welsh Government could support the initiative and its key message that you should never buy a puppy without a contract.

**THANK YOU AND TOAST**

I’d like to finish this evening by thanking you all again for joining us this evening and for your ongoing support for the veterinary profession and for the BVA in Wales.

And I’d like to ask my fellow BVA members to be upstanding in giving a toast to our guests.

**TOAST** – to our guests; i’n gwesteuon

I’m now delighted to hand over to the Minister for Natural Resources and Food, Alun Davies, to hear his perspective on some of the key issues I’ve outlined.

Thank you. Diolch yn fawr

~ENDS~