Honoured guests, ladies and gentleman, welcome to the British Veterinary Association’s annual Welsh dinner.

I am particularly delighted to welcome Environment Minister John Griffiths who has kindly agreed to respond on behalf of the guests for a second year and outline some of the Government’s current animal health and welfare priorities. And we all very much look forward to hearing the Minister later on.

Each of the BVA Presidents has a theme for the presidential term in office; the theme for my year is ‘delivering a healthy future’. And there are a number of elements to this theme that I would like to expand upon. First and foremost it means delivering good health and welfare for the animals in our care, and – by extension of that – delivering good public health and playing our part in a healthy future for Wales’s livestock sector.

Underpinning our ability to do all of this is our scientific knowledge and understanding of disease, which starts in the laboratory.

As most of you will know, when the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (or AHVLA) announced the ‘rationalisation’ of veterinary laboratories last September the BVA and others were particularly concerned at the potential impact in Wales where both facilities at Aberystwyth and Carmarthen were due to lose laboratory work.

The announcement caught us by surprise, not least because decisions appeared to have been made before a proper assessment had been undertaken on the impact on the UK’s surveillance network.

Of course, we do understand that AHVLA and Defra are charged with finding significant budget savings and ensuring value for money, but we believe any future model must be shaped by good surveillance strategies, and not the need to cut costs.

Indeed, AHVLA itself has noted that, in recent years, the value of its surveillance programme has greatly exceeded the cost.
When the Surveillance Advisory Group reported in April it set out a clear direction for the future but did not have the necessary information to flesh out its recommendations. The next stage must be consultation on fully costed plans that do not harm Wales’s, or the UK’s, ability to detect and respond to a disease outbreak.

There is never a good time for a new disease to appear, but the emergence of Schmallenberg Virus in northern Europe and England has provided us with a very timely reminder of the acute need for robust national and international surveillance systems.

I am pleased that communication between Welsh Government and AHVLA has now improved but we must remain open to new ideas as we consider how animal health and welfare policy will be delivered with the full devolution of the animal health budget.

We hope the veterinary profession will be part of that discussion.

The state will always need a core of properly trained, properly motivated, and properly rewarded veterinary surgeons in the event of a notifiable disease outbreak and we would strongly urge against the downgrading of veterinary roles in government, both in terms of individual numbers and in status.

Vets are an integral part of the national conversation on animal health and welfare and we are very pleased to be represented on the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy Steering Group by Ifan Lloyd.

I’m delighted to welcome Peredur Hughes here this evening following his recent appointment as independent chair of the Steering Group and we look forward to working with you.

Drawing in representatives from across the sector the Steering Group has drawn up a list of non-statutory disease priorities and succeeds in sharing information in order to provide expert advice to the Government.

It is partnership work in action.

Initiatives such as the Sheep Scab Task and Finish Group and the upcoming stakeholder seminars at the Royal Welsh Show recognise the value of finding industry-led solutions to significant animal health and welfare problems.

And as we develop the new Animal Health and Welfare Strategy together as partners it will be important to look across borders to colleagues in England, Scotland and beyond; to create a plan that understands both the needs of the Welsh livestock sector and the fact that Great Britain is a single epidemiological unit.

Delivering a healthy future in Wales must include tackling endemic disease and top of the priority list has to be bovine Tuberculosis.

This time last year the BVA expressed concern that the TB eradication plan had been delayed in order to carry out a scientific review. We felt strongly that the plan had already taken account of the available science.

But we respected your stated commitment to a science-led policy.
I know that no one would have been surprised, therefore, at our deep disappointment at the decision – announced in March – to halt the planned badger cull and proceed with badger vaccination – a policy that is not supported or proven by the existing science.

We share the frustration of our farming clients and colleagues at this backwards step. The promise of an average 16% reduction in herd breakdowns over the coming decade certainly didn’t seem insignificant to the vets and livestock keepers battling this devastating disease on a daily basis.

But the decision was clear and now I urge my colleagues to do their utmost to support the roll out of the vaccination policy in the Intensive Action Area.

However, we hope the option of a badger cull remains on the table for consideration as the TB picture continues to develop, to work alongside vaccination and cattle measures and give us the chance to fight TB without one hand tied behind our backs.

The veterinary role in tackling TB is not only to safeguard animal health, but also public health.

And it is our commitment to public health (and what is commonly described as ‘One Health’) that drives us to take the lead in tackling antimicrobial resistance.

The growing resistance of bacteria is a serious global threat to human and animal health. And it is a problem that has hit the headlines with MRSA and other so-called ‘superbugs’.

In a kneejerk reaction to those headlines last year the European Parliament called into question our right to prescribe and dispense veterinary medicines and to use antimicrobials prophylactically on farm.

We are in danger of getting embroiled in a blame game. But the answer lies in working together, across veterinary and human medicine, to preach and practise responsible use of antimicrobials.

The BVA has been at the forefront of the campaign for responsible use in the UK and worked with our colleagues in the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe to promote the message across the EU and beyond.

We know that we must use these vital medicines responsibly, or risk losing them altogether. Removing a veterinary surgeon’s right to prescribe medicines according to his/her clinical judgement will only serve to harm animal health and welfare and as the debate continues in Europe I would urge the Welsh Government – and industry – to support your veterinary professionals and their ability to prescribe responsibly.

As guardians of public health, the veterinary role in abattoirs is vital – not only as a key piece in the surveillance jigsaw, but also in ensuring the UK maintains its reputation for high standards of animal welfare.

The issue of welfare at slaughter is another that has recently hit the headlines. We believe that slaughter without pre-stunning unnecessarily compromises animal welfare – a view that is supported by the FVE, the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, and backed up by science.

EU and UK law insists that animals are stunned before slaughter, but it allows derogations from this rule for slaughter by a religious method for certain communities.
We are concerned that meat from non-stunned slaughter is reaching the mainstream market – something that the law did not intend.

That’s why we’re calling for meat and products from non-stunned slaughter to be labelled as such. We want to move away from the religious debate and focus on the consumer’s right to choose higher welfare produce.

We recognise that it is difficult politically, but BVA has received support from both inside and outside the veterinary profession since raising our concerns publicly. And we would urge you, Minister, to consider these issues as you develop your consultation on welfare at slaughter later this year.

The welfare of livestock is also at the forefront of our recent comments on showing. I am grateful to the Chief Veterinary Officer, Christianne Glossop, for writing to the Association of Show and Agricultural Organisations last November on behalf of the UK’s four CVOs to raise awareness of the issue of teat sealing.

At our charity’s annual welfare discussion forum in May we heard concerns about other measures being taken by exhibitors to enhance the appearance of their animals. And BVA’s Ethics and Welfare Group is currently consulting members to develop a policy across all species.

We hope – and expect – that the incidents we hear about are rare, and we are also grateful to the show organisers for their efforts to tackle the problems head on.

Livestock shows provide a vital focus for rural communities and a shop window to the consumer. We must therefore stamp out any welfare problems before the behaviour of a small number of exhibitors threatens the reputation of the whole livestock sector.

On a much bigger scale is the immediate and significant problem of horse abandonment and fly grazing – described by police in South Wales earlier this year as being at ‘crisis point’.

In June we were pleased to be invited to a summit hosted jointly by the RSPCA and the National Equine Welfare Council. The event allowed all those involved to share ideas on how to approach the relentless situation.

The sheer scale of abandonment and neglect is astonishing. The equine charities are overwhelmed, and yet every week even more is required of them.

It is certainly not a problem confined to Wales and one potential solution being explored by the Equine Council for Northern Ireland is giving the horse agricultural status – something that the BVA and our equine division BEVA have supported.

As the police, local authorities, charities and vets come together to try to get on top of the problem difficult decisions will need to be made. As a veterinary surgeon I can say, hand on heart, that euthanasia in itself is not a welfare issue when carried out appropriately. But it is a bitter pill to swallow when animals have to be put to sleep for want of resources and a responsible owner.

On dog welfare issues the outlook is brighter with Wales leading the way in 2009 with the expert Task and Finish Group.

As you know, we were concerned when the previous administration dropped legislative plans for tighter regulations on dog breeders and last year my predecessor Harvey Locke made a plea for the new Government to put dog welfare back at the top of the agenda.
Wales needs to tackle its reputation for puppy farming by listening to those experts that came together in the Task and Finish Group. In our response to the consultation we make the case for not watering down the recommendations on staff to dog ratios – one staff member for 30 adult dogs is insufficient and the Task and Finish Group proposal for one to 20 should be the maximum.

We have also repeated our call for a section on hereditary disease and responsible breeding.

Responsible breeders are already embracing the plethora of health tests now available and they should be recognised for doing so.

In April this year the BVA’s charity, the Animal Welfare Foundation, and the RSPCA launched the puppy contract and puppy information pack (or PIP).

These documents – designed by veterinary surgeons alongside behaviour, welfare and legal experts – aim to give prospective puppy owners the tools and information they need to ensure they are buying a healthy, happy and well-socialised dog.

We have received a huge amount of positive feedback and endorsements from the major dog welfare organisations, but we know that this voluntary initiative must be backed up by better legislation if we are to make a real difference to the health and welfare of man’s best friend.

The compulsory microchipping of dogs is certainly a bold step in the right direction and we are very grateful to you, Minister, for your personal commitment to progressing this policy.

As a member of the Microchipping Alliance, the BVA has argued for the compulsory microchipping of all dogs throughout the UK. Microchipping is the safest and most effective way to reunite lost and stray dogs with their owners – saving millions of pounds in kennelling costs and reducing the suffering of both dogs and their worried owners.

The consultation is currently open and we were pleased to see that the arguments set out in the documents clearly point towards the need to microchip all dogs within a year of legislation. This approach – which we have seen working well in Northern Ireland – will require cultural change and a significant commitment by the welfare charities and private veterinary surgeons. But there will be clear benefits in the longer term.

Part of that challenge will be in the communication of the new policy – explaining to owners why microchipping is such an essential part of responsible dog ownership.

We were very pleased to see that – unlike Defra – Welsh Government has put clear water between its microchipping policy and the issue of dangerous dogs.

Microchipping will inevitably assist those who are tasked with dealing with out of control dogs, but it is wrong to suggest that microchipping is the answer to dangerous dogs – which is unfortunately what has happened in England.

The answer to dog control problems lies in taking a preventive approach that encompasses better education and focuses on the actions of irresponsible owners rather than the breed or type of dog.

We are grateful to Julie Morgan AM for hosting a meeting earlier this year of all stakeholders committed to finding solutions to irresponsible dog ownership and for calling an Assembly debate on the issue.
Minister – we appreciate your recognition in that debate of the failures of current legislation, particularly the breed-specific section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act. And we were pleased to see the high level of consensus between members of all political parties.

The BVA has worked with the welfare and rehoming charities, police, dog wardens, unions, dog law experts, and others to propose a truly preventive approach to tackling dog behaviour before it becomes serious. And we would be delighted to work with Welsh Government to see those proposals become a reality.

Finally, this evening I would like to talk about delivering a healthy future for the veterinary profession in Wales.

In 2009 Professor Lowe was asked by Defra to produce a report on vets and veterinary services. In his final report he found no overall shortage of vets but highlighted a number of future challenges for the profession and recommended the establishment of a Veterinary Development Council.

The BVA took up the mantle and the VDC was set up in January 2011 under the independent chairmanship of Professor Richard Bennett, and reported in May this year.

The VDC set out a number of recommendations to put vets back at the heart of the agricultural sector throughout the food chain, to ensure vets understand and add value to their clients' businesses, and to address the future role of veterinary technicians.

These are challenges that we hope to address with the help and support of you – our partners across the agri-food sector.

The Government has championed the importance of a strong rural economy for Wales and we share that vision. I hope that the issues I have outlined this evening have reminded you all of the role that vets play in those rural communities and throughout Wales.

On behalf of the BVA I would like to thank you all for coming this evening and for your ongoing engagement with the veterinary profession and support for our Association.

~ENDS~