Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to welcome you all to the British Veterinary Association Annual Welsh Dinner. I am particularly pleased to welcome the Minister for Environment and Sustainable Development, John Griffiths, who has kindly agreed to respond on behalf of our guests this evening. I would like to congratulate you, Minister, on your appointment and say that the BVA is very much looking forward to working with you on animal health and welfare issues over the coming weeks, months and years.

This year, as many of you will know, is particularly important for the veterinary profession as we are celebrating the 250th anniversary of the first veterinary school in Lyon, France.

To mark the anniversary 2011 has been designated World Veterinary Year and offers us a chance to promote the work of veterinary surgeons across the globe.

Of course livestock and pet owners will understand the role of their own vet in safeguarding the health of their animals, but the role of veterinarians reaches far beyond that of an animal doctor.

Vets are the first line of defence against disease, protecting both animals and humans; we secure the safety and supply of the food we eat; we undertake research into animal and human health and the links between the two; we provide expert scientific advice to policy-makers; we provide emergency assistance in disaster-hit and war-torn cities; and we work in communities around the world to support those who rely on livestock for their incomes.

Vet 2011 also affords us the opportunity to take stock, to look back and learn from our successes and our mistakes, and to look ahead to new challenges and opportunities.

We live in a time of enormous fluctuation – politically, economically and socially.

The new Government with new priorities here in Wales; the first Coalition Government in Westminster for decades; the devolution of the animal health budget; the need for significant cuts to the public purse; and the increasing consumer demands for better animal welfare standards and more affordable food.

For all these reasons I have chosen ‘Vets in a changing world’ as the theme for my presidential year.

In a changing world the threat posed by both endemic and exotic disease looms large.

I don’t need to tell anyone here that the need to tackle bovine Tuberculosis features highly on our list of priorities.
The BVA has been very supportive of the Welsh Government’s commitment to an eradication programme that offers vets and farmers the full range of tools to tackle the disease in wildlife as well as cattle.

We commended the brave decision taken by the last administration to go ahead with a government-led badger cull in the Intensive Action Area.

And we responded positively to the Government’s plans to deal with the increasing problem of the disease in non-bovines.

It will be no surprise then that the BVA was extremely disappointed by your announcement last week, Minister, for a delay in implementing the Badger Order while another review of the scientific evidence is carried out.

As veterinary scientists we are fully committed to science-based policy, but we believe that that work has already been done. We are concerned that further delay to the implementation of a targeted cull will simply result in further devastation to Welsh herds. However, we do acknowledge your stated desire that the review be completed within a short timeframe and we appreciate your commitment to that. We are also very keen to see a strong veterinary representation on the review panel.

In the meantime I urge farmers in the affected areas to continue working to their comprehensive biosecurity plans to protect their herds from the disease. Success in the battle with bTB will only be achieved if the government, industry and vets work together.

It is this partnership approach that will also be necessary to tackle the scourge of sheep scab. We are pleased to note that the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy Steering Group has recently agreed to place sheep scab on the list of non-notifiable disease priorities, and we would encourage a coordinated approach to its eradication that does all it can to avoid the development of anthelmintic resistance.

The partnership approach will also see Great Britain declared bluetongue-free early next month. Although we will continue to push the EU for measures that will allow our farmers to vaccinate, it is a tremendous achievement to turn the situation around from the outbreak in 2007 to freedom in 2011.

But as one disease threat subsides, another arises with *Echinococcus multilocularis* (or EM), which we fear could emerge as a result of changes to the Pet Travel Scheme and the increasing movement of companion animals.

On 31st December the UK’s derogation from European pet travel rules will end. This derogation allows the UK, Ireland and three other Member States to impose stricter controls on dogs, cats and pet ferrets crossing their borders to protect against rabies, ticks and tapeworms.

As guardians of public health the veterinary profession is particularly concerned that the harmonisation of pet travel rules could result in the introduction of EM into the UK and Ireland.

Although relatively benign in dogs, the resulting disease in humans – alveolar Echinococcosis – is an invasive cancer-like cystic stage of the parasite that is invariably fatal in humans if not treated. Even when diagnosed early, treatment can be life long with the resultant huge cost to the health service.
The BVA has been working closely with Defra and our veterinary colleagues in Ireland to lobby the European Commission to make the case for ongoing tapeworm controls. When it comes to disease control it is clearly sensible to do what we can to prevent spread of disease between regions and Member States rather than waiting until it has spread and then attempting to eliminate it.

The principle is sound and the science clearly supports a policy of ongoing controls, but it could be undermined by political wrangling in Europe over the new legislative regime under the Lisbon Treaty.

Whatever the political decision, it will be vets on the ground that will provide the necessary surveillance to limit the impact of any disease incursion.

Vets are the eyes and ears in the field and the experts in the laboratory.

This year we also marked the 10th anniversary of the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak; a stark reminder in this changing world that we need to learn from past experiences and mistakes.

Towards the end of last year the BVA took part in the UK-wide Exercise Silver Birch – an FMD outbreak scenario designed to test the country’s preparedness for a major disease outbreak.

We ran the exercise in real time and relayed messages between Defra and our expert specialist and territorial divisions, ensuring that decisions made in Whitehall were based on the best advice from those in the field.

As expected, the exercise exposed a number of policy and communications gaps and we will now work with government and industry to address these issues. We are all agreed that the protocols and strategies for decision-making need to be put in place in peacetime so let’s get on and do it.

The UK’s disease preparedness is highly dependent on coordination between Westminster, Cardiff, Holyrood and Stormont and here the relationship between the UK’s four Chief Veterinary Officers is key.

It is also dependent on the ability to mobilise an army of contingency veterinary surgeons. In 2001 I, like many others, signed up as a Temporary Veterinary Inspector to help in the fight against FMD.

Ten years on and practice dynamics have changed. It’s unlikely that the Government would be able to rely on the same resource from private veterinary practices.

Last year my predecessor Bill Reilly outlined the difficulties that the BVA was experiencing in negotiating a professional fee for the professional service delivered by Official Veterinarians (or OV’s) – vets who carry out work in the field for Animal Health (now AHVLA).

Animal Health had made the surprise announcement that OV work, such as TB testing and contingency work, would be put out to tender. We feared this move would result in an enormous loss of goodwill and ultimately a decision by many veterinary practices to no longer carry out any OV work.

Despite a stated desire to implement a tendering system by spring 2011 there has been no progress and no further discussions between the BVA and AHVLA on how such a system would operate. There has been no confirmation that tendering is off the table, but we are hopeful that our concerns have been heard.
In January the newly appointed Chief Executive of AHVLA, Catherine Brown, addressed the BVA and other stakeholders. She suggested that there may be more work for OVs but in these difficult economic times she also told us that AHVLA is looking for cheaper ways to procure OV services.

We will continue to explore what this means for our members and what it could mean for the UK’s disease preparedness.

The uncertainty over OV work is just one of many external pressures facing the veterinary profession.

Recently we faced concerted moves in Europe to remove our right to dispense veterinary medicines, as part of a European Parliament Resolution addressing the serious issue of antimicrobial resistance.

Stories that hit the headlines about new strains of MRSA and the recent E Coli case on mainland Europe all add to the growing concern that the use of antimicrobials (or antibiotics) in human and animal medicine is increasing the resistance of bacteria to the best weapons we have to fight them.

It is a concern that we at the BVA take very seriously. As a profession we need to lead the way and be seen to be leading the way in responsible use. The BVA is an active member of the RUMA alliance, working with government and industry to promote Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture. And we are working with our human medicine colleagues at the British Medical Association to preach responsible use to our respective members.

So it was with surprise and some alarm that we learned of efforts by a cross-party group of MEPs to stop veterinary surgeons from selling veterinary medicines to farmers and other animal owners. The BVA worked hard, alongside the Federation of Veterinarians in Europe, to explain to MEPs the health and welfare consequences of such a policy, and the move was defeated.

But it was a warning shot to vets across Europe that we must do all we can to slow down the growth of resistance and safeguard the use of antimicrobials for animals and humans. We must all take responsibility and seek to change poorer practices by educating our colleagues and our clients.

On the subject of education, in practices up and down the country vets preach to their clients about responsible pet ownership, a key component of which is the microchipping of dogs, cats and other companion animals.

Microchipping is the safest and most effective way to ensure stray pets are reunited with their owners, and that is why the BVA has joined forces with a number of animal welfare organisations to establish the Microchipping Alliance to campaign for the compulsory microchipping of all dogs.

Another clear benefit of permanent identification is the increased traceability it provides between puppies and their breeders. We were pleased that this was recognised by the Task and Finish Group set up in 2009 to review the licensing and regulation of dog breeding in Wales. And we were delighted that the comprehensive package of measures recommended by the Group to tackle the abhorrent puppy farm trade was enthusiastically welcomed by previous Government.

However, on this issue the Welsh Government took a bold step forward and then two steps back. In March the then-Minister announced that new regulations to tackle puppy farming would not be
introduced.

Minister, I implore you to put this issue back at the top of Government’s agenda. Too often veterinary surgeons see the devastating consequences of poor breeding practices.

A huge amount of work has already been completed by experts in this field and bold policies proposed. I can assure you that you will have the full support of the veterinary profession.

As this is World Veterinary Year I would like to end this evening by discussing some of the changes in our profession.

I mentioned earlier our concerns about the future availability of Official Veterinarians and this ties in with the ongoing discussions about the potential shortage of vets in the UK, particularly in large animal practice.

In 2009 Professor Lowe’s report on Vets and Veterinary Services found no absolute shortfall in farm animal vets but it did set out a number of challenges for the profession, including how we adapt to the needs of our clients and how we shape the role of the vet as the leader of a team of paraprofessionals.

To address some of these issues and provide leadership for the profession the BVA has set up the Veterinary Development Council. The work of the Council subgroups is now underway and we look forward to reporting back to you on our progress and findings next year.

At the same time we are looking at the issue of veterinary education and the introduction of hugely increased tuition fees.

Long before the idea of the £9000-a-year degree was mooted the BVA raised concerns about the financial difficulties faced by veterinary students suffering the double whammy of longer courses and an inability to earn money with holiday jobs due to the compulsory element of Extra Mural Studies (or EMS) in the veterinary course.

Under the new arrangements graduates of the five veterinary schools in England will face debts of £45,000 to £54,000 in tuition fees alone. Considering that those graduates are likely to earn just half of their human medicine counterparts and it’s a very worrying situation.

In particular we are concerned that these vets will eschew the less well-paid roles in research and in large animal practice in remote and rural areas.

The Welsh Government has announced its intention to subsidise the undergraduate education of Welsh students attending UK universities. This is a commendable policy which the BVA warmly welcomes.

We are keen to work with governments in both Cardiff and Westminster to encourage and inspire the next generation of veterinary surgeons in Wales.

Although the veterinary profession has changed a huge amount in the past 250 years the principles on which it was founded by Charles Bourgelat are still strong today. The commitment to science-based medicine and the concept of One Health – linking animal and human pathology and biology – remain at the heart of the profession in 2011.
On behalf of the BVA I would like to thank you all for your ongoing support for the profession. It is these links with government, with industry and with the communities we work in that will help sustain our profession for the next 250 years.

And so I would like to ask my fellow BVA members to be upstanding in a toast to our guests.

Thank you.

~ENDS~