

Speech to the BVA annual NI Dinner

Daniella Dos Santos

President of the British Veterinary Association

on Tuesday 26 November

at Parliament Buildings, Stormont

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you, Aurelie.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for joining us at the British Veterinary Association's annual Northern Ireland dinner. I'm absolutely delighted to be addressing you today in what is my first major speech as BVA President.

I may not be as local to this area as my predecessor, Simon Doherty, but I know that this is an event where there is always a very warm welcome to be had from the brightest and best of Northern Ireland's veterinary and farming communities.

I'd like to start by thanking Professor Nigel Scollan for being our guest speaker this evening. Nigel has a lifelong passion for farming and animal production and a truly international outlook on the agri-food sector, having spent parts of his career in Canada, Wales and Scotland before taking up his current role as the Director of the Institute for Global Food Security at Queen's University Belfast.

We're really looking forward to hearing him impart his wisdom and insights into how we can continue to innovate to future-proof our farming systems and keep our food safety and welfare standards high in the years to come.

Before we hear from Nigel, we're delighted that Northern Ireland's Chief Veterinary Officer Robert Huey will be addressing us.

Robert and his team have always been a great source of information, insights and support, and we look forward to continuing to work closely together on the issues that matter most to our members.

BVA President's theme

My presidential theme this year is #VetDiversity, celebrating the value of difference. Diversity not only in the career paths and roles veterinary surgeons take, but also the diversity of individuals within our profession. Every single one of us plays a vital role in society, and everyone contributes something different and positive to the profession.

As well as celebrating diversity in the profession, I also want to prioritise BVA's ongoing work looking at what it is to be a vet in 2019 and how to create supportive and inclusive workplaces where everyone feels motivated, accepted and fairly rewarded for the valuable work that they do.

That means exploring how we widen access to education, support graduates entering the workplace, empower vets to call out discrimination and other unacceptable behaviour and ensure that vets at all career stages have access to advice and wellbeing support whenever they need it.

Whenever I come to Northern Ireland I'm always struck by the strength of relationships across the veterinary community and how the profession offers guidance and peer-to-peer support to colleagues at all stages, from your thriving Young Vet Network to the continued success of Vet Support NI in providing a listening ear to all those that need it at any time. There is so much to be proud of in this close-knit and supportive community,

and I hope that you will all engage with and continue to champion #VetDiversity in all its forms.

Manifesto

From one type of diversity to another, I'm sure you will agree that there is something for everyone in our recently launched manifesto for animals, vets, and public health. We've drawn together a wide-ranging list of ten pledges that we would like to see all political parties signing up to in their manifestos in the interests of animal health and welfare, public health and the ongoing resilience of the veterinary community.

These pledges range from species-specific improvements, such as a ban on keeping primates as pets, to changes in how legislation is developed and enacted, such as a commitment to uphold animal welfare standards in future trade deals and agricultural policy. We want to see the principle of animal sentience finally pushed over the line and into law, and we want to

see animal welfare on the national curriculum, to give future generations an early start in understanding what it means to care for animals and ensure they lead a happy, healthy life. Where pledges span devolved policy, we will be engaging with DAERA in lieu of a minister to ensure that they are implemented in Northern Ireland.

Our hope is that people across the political spectrum will agree that all ten manifesto pledges will make a huge and lasting difference to the veterinary workforce, our clients and the communities we serve.

Brexit

The manifesto draws together the most pressing and topical things that matter to our members, so it should come as no surprise that Brexit takes the top slot, given the far-reaching opportunities and challenges it could present across the UK's veterinary community in the months and years ahead.

Our number one ask is for politicians to reject a no-deal Brexit, to avoid the serious consequences that we believe this scenario, in its current form, would have for our workforce and for animal health and welfare. While 31 October may have now passed without the planned event, there is no room for complacency about the very real risks that a no-deal could still present if it remains on the table as we approach the new deadline and the likely political upheaval in between.

We are particularly concerned about how a no-deal Brexit will impact on Northern Ireland, given its large agri-food sector and steady flow of goods to and from both sides of the border.

The demand for certification of animals and animal products in Northern Ireland is likely to spiral far beyond the rise predicted in the rest of the UK in the event of a no-deal Brexit. And composite products such as pizzas, sandwiches and ready meals would massively ramp up the volume of certificates required as they would need a

separate sign-off for each animal product they contain, whether it's cheese, egg, chicken or chorizo.

A no-deal Brexit could also have challenging implications for the movement of animals over the land border. As things stand, pet owners would need to start preparing at least four months ahead even if they are just taking their dog to Donegal for the weekend, and these new requirements add further strain on Northern Ireland's small animal vets, who would face increased demands for carrying out the rabies vaccinations and testing required well ahead of travelling to the EU.

We are in regular dialogue with Defra, DAERA, other devolved governments and regulatory bodies, and we know that a lot is being done to prepare for, communicate and mitigate against the challenges that a no-deal scenario could present.

An example of this was the recent DAERA certification training days, which nearly 150 vets attended to get the

qualifications needed to certify animal products in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The turn-out across two days included small animal vets, recently retired vets and vets on maternity leave, all wanting to do their bit to get the sector as primed and ready as possible for the predicted increase in demand for certification services if we do leave without a deal. I see each and every vet who came along as a credit to the workforce and a sterling supporter of Northern Ireland's agri-food industry.

As vets, we are committed to doing whatever we can to prepare for the potential impacts of Brexit, and as BVA we are committed to making sure that our members feel informed and supported and giving them a strong voice as post-Brexit policy is negotiated and shaped.

However, with the clock ticking down, we remain deeply concerned that there is still work to do and many unknowns around the scale and scope of impacts on our colleagues, our clients, and the animals under our care.

Animal Health and Welfare Strategic Framework

Keeping in mind all the unknowns attached to Brexit, we were pleased to see and feed into DAERA's new Strategic Framework for Animal Health and Welfare for Northern Ireland. As we enter a period of continued uncertainty, it's at least positive to see that the opportunity is being seized to think systematically about how to improve animal health and welfare outcomes, and how this fits in with Northern Ireland's overall direction of travel.

BVA has been clear that vets are a vital piece of the puzzle for overseeing and improving animal health and welfare and working closely with government, industry and other stakeholders. And we're delighted to see the draft framework recognising the merits of a One Health approach in order to tackle issues and reap the most benefits from successful partnerships.

AMR

Last weekend marked the end of World Antibiotic Awareness Week, so I can think of no better time to celebrate the sterling joined-up work that has gone into meeting RUMA reduction targets in production animals well ahead of schedule.

AMR is a One Health issue, as exemplified in our newly published One Health in Action report: a passion project for Simon. It has been heartening to see the Northern Ireland CMO and CVO joining forces to help tackle the threat of antimicrobial resistance at both practice and policy level and jointly launch the Northern Ireland five-year action plan at the Balmoral Show this year.

There's a lot of progress being made on AMR in the small animal sphere, too, and I was pleased to take part in a steering group led by RUMA's current chairman recently to look at how we best tackle this threat in small animal practice.

I applaud everyone who has worked hard to reduce the risk of AMR and protect our antibiotics for future generations.

Surveillance

This year has also seen collaboration on surveillance continue apace as we work together to monitor, contain and guard against diseases posing the biggest threats to animal health in Northern Ireland.

The year has seen good progress with much of the bTB Strategy and the completion of the stand-out pilot scheme looking at the use of a “test and vaccinate or remove” approach to tackle the disease in badgers; we anticipate the findings of that research. At BVA, we’re reaching the home straight with our bTB Working Group and look forward to reporting back next year on what we see as crucial next steps in tackling this devastating disease.

I'd also like to pay special tribute to the team efforts at airports in Northern Ireland that seized 300 kg of illegally imported meat and dairy products in passenger luggage in June alone, samples of which contained traces of African Swine Fever DNA. It's really reassuring to see that government vets and inspectors are united in their vigilance to prevent the incursion of this deadly disease.

With African Swine Fever posing a significant and growing threat to animal welfare and agriculture throughout all parts of the UK, it's inherent on us all to make every effort to curb its spread and raise public awareness of the risks of bringing animal products that may be carrying the disease into the country.

Welfare at slaughter

Welfare at slaughter is another issue that continues to be a top concern for BVA members, particularly non-stun slaughter.

We believe that all animals should be stunned before slaughter to render them insensible to pain. While there is no indication that non-stun slaughter is happening in Northern Ireland, it could still be finding its way into the mainstream food chain and onto supermarket shelves unlabelled. We are demanding that consumers should be able to make informed choices about the meat they eat, and supply should match legitimate demand to reduce the suffering of millions of animals.

This issue more than any other requires a respectful and collaborative approach, which is why it's been especially encouraging to see such a wide range of expert engagement with our Welfare at Slaughter Working Group that will report next year. We appreciate your continued support with this important campaign.

Pet welfare

Turning to pet welfare, this has been a year where our Breed to Breathe campaign hit new heights, with more and more veterinary professionals and pet-lovers adding their voice to raise awareness of the often life-limiting health problems suffered by flat-faced dogs, cats and rabbits.

This has been the stand-out strand of a wider workstream to encourage both prospective owners and brands to choose health over looks when it comes to buying a pet or using a particular breed in advertising and media. Thank you to all of you who have lent your support and helped to amplify this crucial message. We're starting to see that big brands are willing to listen to our expert input as veterinary professionals.

Responsible pet ownership

Staying on the subject of pets, responsible sourcing and ownership is a key priority for BVA, helping to educate the public about what a big commitment it is to take on a pet, and how to ensure that prospective owners know how to find a happy, healthy pet. And keep them that way.

We're delighted to endorse the Puppy Contract – a one-stop guide for buying a healthy puppy from a responsible breeder produced jointly by BVA's charity the Animal Welfare Foundation and RSPCA. We've also added equal support to the new Kitten Checklist, so that cat lovers also have expert advice at their fingertips.

Puppy smuggling

Finally, I'm sure that you will all have seen some of the harrowing coverage from the recent exposé of Welsh puppy farms, or heard about the heartbreaking health problems and disease risks carried by puppies smuggled into the UK. Our manifesto asks for crossparty support for our call for legislation to be strengthened against illegal imports of puppies for sale. As a nation of animal lovers, it is simply unacceptable that criminals are still getting away with this cruel and exploitative trade.

We recognise that there is work to do both to empower vets to spot and report suspicious activity if they see a puppy that they think may have been illegally imported, and to educate the public about how to avoid the heartache that may come from buying a puppy that has been smuggled into the country with scant regard for its welfare. BVA is really proud to have developed flowcharts that advise our members of the simple steps

to spot and report suspected illegal importing of puppies; stay tuned for the Northern Ireland version that launches soon.

Veterinary Education

We know that next year will bring many challenges, opportunities and competing demands for the Northern Ireland veterinary community; there are things that we can anticipate with some certainty and others which will have a scale and scope entirely determined by how things pan out politically over the coming months.

What we can say with certainty is that it will be more imperative than ever to ensure that we have a thriving, motivated and valued veterinary workforce both now and for the future. A significant amount of work has gone in this year to looking at the needs of the workforce, exploring how we can address recruitment and retention challenges and putting support in place for vets at every stage in their career.

One thing we'll be watching with interest is the outcome of the University of Ulster's proposals to develop Northern Ireland's first vet school. We're delighted that representatives from the University can join us tonight and look forward to hearing more as these proposals take shape. As a profession we will be actively engaging with this and making sure the interests of vets, present and future, are taken into consideration.

Thank yous

Much of the activity and engagement that I've mentioned here could not have been achieved without my incredibly committed BVA Northern Ireland Branch colleagues. I want to say a huge thank you to Aurelie Moralis, the Branch President; she and the wider branch team have achieved a huge amount and been a driving force for engaging members in policy and ensuring that the branch gives them a strong voice on the issues that matter to them.

And to return very briefly to my theme, the branch is a shining example of #VetDiversity in action. In Aurelie we have a vet born in Belgium who is making huge contributions to the pharmaceutical industry through her important role at Zoetis. In Susan Cunningham our Junior Vice President we have a vet whose work straddles the border and who has honed her truly global experience while working in Hong Kong for the RSPCA. And in Alan Gordon our Senior Vice President we have someone who brings 40 years of extensive and varied experience in mixed practice. A diverse dream team championing and advocating for the Northern Ireland veterinary community!

To our guests, please do contact Aurelie, or any BVA colleague, if we can be of assistance on animal health and welfare, or veterinary public health matters moving forwards.

If everyone would now please rise, and raise your glasses in a toast to “#VetDiversity”. [Toast]

I'd now like to hand you over to Robert Huey, Northern Ireland's Chief Veterinary Officer. Thank you.