

BVA President Daniella Dos Santos
Speech at BVA London Dinner

**on Tuesday 4 February 2020 at One Great George Street,
London**

– PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to wish you all a very warm welcome to the British Veterinary Association's annual London Dinner.

Now, before I start you may have spotted these colourful z-cards. We've produced these handy guides to support our #chooseassured campaign that explains the welfare and sustainability credentials of UK assurance schemes and encourages consumers to look for the logos when shopping. Please do take one with you.

We'd like to say a huge thank you to Lord Gardiner, Minister for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, for joining us as our Guest of Honour and speaker this evening. We always welcome the opportunity to work with Lord Gardiner, and we look forward to hearing from him shortly.

#VetDiversity

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

As well as celebrating diversity, I am also prioritising BVA's work looking at what it is to be a vet in 2020 and how we can 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 new 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. And in doing this we've worked closely with a wide range of groups to join a Big Conversation on diversity across the profession. I hope that you – as the veterinary profession's key partners and as users of veterinary services – will all help us to champion #VetDiversity in all its forms.

Manifesto

BVA represents the whole veterinary profession and our areas of interest are wide and diverse. Ahead of the General Election we launched our manifesto for animals, vets, and public health, and I'm sure you will agree that there is something for everyone in our ten pledges.

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've reiterated our call 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.

During the election we were pleased to see a huge amount of cross-party consensus for many of our asks. The challenge now is to work together to make them a reality. We're looking forward to working with Defra, with members of Efra Committee, and with all parties to progress these policies that will make a huge and lasting difference to the veterinary workforce and animal welfare.

Brexit

I obviously can't get too far into this speech without talking about a small matter of note from Friday. As we enter the transition period, BVA will be working hard to keep our members informed of the changes, challenges and opportunities that Brexit will bring. Our members certainly have a diverse range of views on EU Exit, but whether you were leave or remain, we see these next few months as our chance to shape the future.

As veterinary surgeons, we recognise the value of collaboration. And in that spirit, we're proud that the UK will remain an active member of the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe. In fact, this June RCVS and BVA will jointly host the FVE General Assembly in London – 38 European countries coming together to share knowledge, expertise and experience to improve animal health and welfare across the continent.

Brexit – workforce capacity

When my predecessor Simon Doherty addressed you all last year, we were on the cusp of a huge win for the veterinary workforce and animal welfare. The Home Office decision to reinstate vets on the Shortage Occupation List is a resounding vote of confidence in the value of vets and a cast-iron commitment to safeguard the profession against shortfalls in capacity in the uncertain times ahead.

But we can't and won't end there. While we're so proud of all the work that went on across the veterinary community to secure this success, restoring vets to the list isn't a cure-all for all of the capacity challenges facing us, especially in vital areas such as public health and food safety.

Only yesterday, the Prime Minister confirmed a set of negotiating priorities that would mean animals and animal products exported from the UK into the EU single market (and indeed from Great Britain into Northern Ireland) will need veterinary certification documents and checks whether we end up with a deal or a No Deal. This could

spark a surge in demand on our members' capacity, and really underlines the need for a multi-pronged and multi-stakeholder approach to ensure we have a flexible and future-proofed veterinary workforce for the years to come.

For example, increasing vet school places and widening access may be one piece of the puzzle, but we will need to match that with increased per capita funding, in order to keep standards high and support both our domestic and international students throughout their training. It's estimated that the cost of equipping students with the skills they need to qualify is £20,000 per student, per year of study. The reality is that tuition fees and government funding don't come close to matching these costs. And this gap will widen still further if funding levels stay static but need to be spread across higher numbers of students.

If the Government is truly committed to boosting workforce resilience and ensuring that we have the capacity we need in crucial areas after Brexit, I would urge Ministers to look at how to fund our future vets, to give students from all backgrounds the best shot at a successful pathway to graduation.

I know you might think I'm biased but it's objectively true to say that the UK has some of the best vet schools in the world. And these institutions attract the brightest and best international students who complete their undergraduate studies here. We want to give them the opportunity to stay and use that training to become members of our profession and practise in the UK.

We support the moves towards a post-study work visa for UK vet school graduates and will be pushing to see this come to fruition in the Immigration Bill.

Ending free movement was always going to have a profound impact on a profession that has over half of its members registering each year from overseas, the vast majority being from the European Union.

We've had welcome assurances that our highly prized, highly skilled EU vets will be able to keep making the valuable contribution that they do long after the Brexit transition period ends. However, it's critical that along with these welcome

assurances, we make sure that our EU vets still feel that the UK is open to them as a positive and fulfilling place of work.

Last week, the Migration Advisory Committee set out recommendations for Government as it shapes the UK's future immigration system. However the government decides to forge ahead, a key challenge ahead will be getting the new system in place and working for everyone by the end of the year, to provide certainty to the employers who will need time to prepare for these changes.

BVA remains particularly concerned about how the future immigration system will protect the vets doing vital public health work and welfare monitoring in UK abattoirs, 95 per cent of whom hail from the EU. All are qualified vets, but some may start off in lower-paid meat hygiene inspection roles when they enter the workplace here. As a matter of urgency, the Government needs to consider the implications of these alternative pathways to ensure that the supply of these highly skilled professionals isn't allowed to run dry under any circumstances.

We'll continue to work with government and others to ensure we have a flexible, skilled and robust veterinary workforce that meets the UK's needs for both the immediate future and in the longer term.

Brexit – welfare standards

I don't need to remind this audience that vets have an absolutely vital role to play in monitoring and upholding animal welfare standards at every stage of the supply chain, and that value cannot be overstated at a time when the UK looks to step onto the global stage with a firm footing building new trade links.

I'm delighted that so many representatives from the farming community are joining us tonight, and can state very clearly that we as vets stand with you in pushing for assurances that imports produced to lower animal health and welfare standards will not be accepted as part of future trade deals. There must be no mixed messages.

The UK cannot commit to raising the bar for “Brand Britain” while allowing in goods that don’t meet the high standards that British consumers rightly want and expect.

The media is obsessed with chlorine-washed chicken and it certainly makes a good headline. But we mustn’t allow it to distract from the grim realities about the animal welfare compromises that could be imported to the UK. I hope that tonight we can all agree that our reputation relies on not allowing animal health and welfare to be compromised at any cost.

Welfare at slaughter

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

BVA believes that all animals should be stunned before slaughter to render them insensible to pain. We are demanding that consumers should be able to make informed choices about the meat they eat, and that 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 later this year. We appreciate your continued support with this important campaign.

Bovine TB

I hope over the course of the night you’ll have a chance to meet James Russell, our Junior Vice President, who will take over from me as BVA President in September. Among many valuable interests and insights that James brings to BVA is his expertise around Bovine TB, and it couldn’t be a better year to put this to good use!

We’re told that the Government’s response to the Godfray Review is imminent, and after the Spring our own TB Working Group will launch its position, setting out the work and solutions that we feel should be prioritised to get a handle on this

devastating disease. As vets, we have a major role to play in informing future strategies and taking mutual ownership of the huge task in hand, alongside farmers, governments and wider industry.

Pet welfare

Turning to pet welfare, we're delighted that support is still so high for our #BreedtoBreathe campaign, 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. Thanks to this strong and unified voice, we're seeing big brands, including Mr Kipling and Fidelity International, willing to listen and act on our concerns and advice.

Puppy smuggling

I'm sure that you will all have seen some of the harrowing coverage from last year's 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 cross-party 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.

All too often vets are faced with animals of unknown origin that may have been smuggled. To help manage this problem, BVA has developed flowcharts that advise our members of the simple steps to spot and report suspected illegal imports. But we shouldn't be put in this position. We need a more robust approach from government to help stamp out this scourge from our society.

Women in the Profession

Before I hand over to Lord Gardiner I want to finish by returning very briefly to the #VetDiversity theme, and tell you about something very, very special that happened just a short walk from here at the end of last year.

Some of you may be aware that December 2019 marked the centenary of female vets, barristers and accountants being given the legal right to practise in the UK, thanks to the introduction of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. Just ahead of Christmas, I had the huge honour of being able to visit the Parliamentary Archives to view and hold the Act that paved the way for so many pioneering female vets to enter the profession and helped to bring us to the point of the fantastic #VetDiversity that we see across the veterinary community today.

Of course, there's still more work to do to tackle the gender pay gap and support more women into leadership positions, but we are making progress and tonight, I am so proud to stand here as the fifth female BVA President and champion a profession that has three female Chief Veterinary Officers across the UK, including Christine Middlemiss who joins us tonight. Thanks to the amazing women who went before me and challenged the status quo I have been able to join this amazing profession and do a job I love.

Thank yous

#VetDiversity takes many forms, and I want to celebrate the wide range of benefits that vets realise for society, whether they're working in clinical practice, public health, charities, research or academia. It seems fitting tonight to pay special tribute to the tireless Government vets who have been working so hard behind the scenes to keep us and our animals safe, all against a Brexit backdrop. You are all unsung heroes and a credit to our profession.

My Presidential term started in September 2019, so it is General Election year, Brexit year and one spanning a huge amount of work at BVA, including feeding into an ambitious review of the concept of 'under our care' and the future role of telemedicine in the veterinary profession. We can only achieve the breadth of what

we do thanks to the strength and support of TeamBVA, so I would just like to finish by thanking my fellow BVA Officers, the incredible staff, our members and all of you here tonight who support and champion #VetDiversity.

It's going to be another busy and challenging year, but I'm excited by what lies ahead and will make sure that BVA continues to speak with a strong voice on all the issues that matter most to our members.

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

I'd now like to hand you over to Lord Gardiner, Minister for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity. Thank you.