

Members' Day Speech, James Russell, BVA President

23 September 2021

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

When I became BVA President at the 2020 Members' Day it was the first time we'd had to hold what is a major highlight of the association calendar virtually. Instead of the usual in-person handover of the chains of office many of you will remember our Charlie and the Chocolate factory / Mike Teevee style video where Daniella passed the medal through space and between our respective screens, and we filmed our speeches ahead of time as back-up in case we fell foul of any technical difficulties. Thankfully Zoom was on best behaviour that day, and we hope to see more of the same today as Members' Day goes hybrid!

My presidential year has been like no other in that it has played out entirely against the backdrop of Covid-19 and all the unprecedented change, challenges and uncertainty that has come with it for all of us. I would have loved to have met more of our members, stakeholders and supporters in person over the last twelve months, but am nonetheless so proud of the relationships that have been fostered and built on during this difficult time.

18 months on from the first UK lockdown, Covid continues to test us all in ways we could never have imagined previously. Even as restrictions recede and the vaccine roll-out continues apace we know that there is still a lot to do to adjust to the 'new normal' and do everything that we can to keep ourselves, colleagues and clients safe and supported.

Since those fateful early days in March 2020, we've made it our top priority to keep pace with new restrictions brought about by Covid-19, and worked hard to help our

members to navigate these difficult and dizzyingly unpredictable times. When our members were telling us that they needed up-to-the-minute information on what new requirements meant for them in practice, we gathered everything together in our Covid hub, a one-stop-shop of updates for vets and their clients. When you told us that some government guidelines hadn't spelled out what was expected of the veterinary profession, we pushed for answers and issued guidance as soon as we got them. And when it became clear that a small but vocal minority of animal owners were reacting badly to new and essential working arrangements, we launched the #RespectYourVet campaign, calling on clients to #BeKind to veterinary teams who were doing the very best they could under unparalleled circumstances.

And I consider it so important that as we make these steps out of the peak of the pandemic that we prioritise our mental health and wellbeing and look out for our colleagues too. I made 'Keeping vets healthy' my presidential theme, and we'll make sure that this is an ongoing priority in the support we offer the veterinary community.

I am also really proud of what has been achieved by BVA and our members in spite of Covid-19. We have a small team of staff who have worked really hard to make sure that we're still supporting and championing our members and acting as a strong voice for vets at senior political levels across the UK.

All this work really reveals itself through some of the animal welfare wins that the year has brought, and in the profile and resonance of our policy and campaigning activity.

We were delighted to see parts of the Government's Animal Welfare Action Plan read like a checklist of some of the big legislative changes which BVA and others have been campaigning on, including a pledge to ban keeping primates as pets and take action on serious pet welfare issues such as puppy smuggling and cropping dogs' ears. And on the agricultural side, I consider our work around welfare at

slaughter to be a personal highlight among many, as we've built positive and constructive relationships with all parties invested in this important and sensitive issue.

Against the pandemic backdrop, Brexit has continued to occupy a lot of time. I'm not just talking about the many meetings BVA staff and officers have had with Government and stakeholders as we try to keep the workforce informed and supported to navigate changes and impacts. I'm also talking about the sheer volume of hours required from vets and their teams on the ground as they adjust to new requirements, increased demands on already-constrained capacity, shifting timeframes and reams of complex paperwork. We know that this challenge is magnified by short notice of both changes, and delays to those same changes. Rest assured that we'll be continuing to make sure that the profession has a strong voice in these conversations as everyone gets to grips with the new normal of EU Exit.

As we enter the next association year, big topics such as Brexit, sustainability, antimicrobial resistance and disease control will continue to be major priorities at BVA, along with making sure that we are supporting our members whatever their circumstances, concerns or career stage.

When I talk about supporting the workforce, I must squeeze in an honorary mention of our Carpool Cases series: informal online sessions created especially for students as they start their journey in Team Vet. We prided ourselves on saying there was no such thing as a silly question, and I hope that the not-so-silly answers offered over the course of 26 hours of total content provide a useful resource that will keep the conversations going among our up-and-coming vets over years to come. We are excited to be embarking on season 4 just this week.

One of the biggest joys that I've had during these tricky and testing twelve months has been seeing and interacting with first-hand the expertise, creativity and

compassion that exists across our profession, and among many of the colleagues and stakeholders who support and champion the veterinary community most closely. Not all of these people are vets; I've also been inspired, to name just a few by the members of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary working group, who are working so diligently to unravel the new complexities of Brexit and keep the food chain going, and by the livestock keepers who collaborate so closely with vets to make sure we can all do the best we can for their animals' health and welfare.

We can't do a fraction of this without the support of our members, and I want to thank each and every one of you for your continued support for BVA. I take huge personal pride in the fact that despite the challenges of recent times our recruitment and retention of members remains high; it's fantastic that vets across the community want to join us and help us speak for the profession with a strong and expert voice.

I also want to say a big thank you to our volunteer Council and Committee Members, and our divisions, for your time, scrutiny and expert insights; it's thanks to you that our policy work is so well crafted, well considered and respected. Thanks also go to our Branches in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I am so grateful to everyone who has played a part this year in spreading the word about BVA's work at the grassroots level and ensuring that we can look at devolved policies through a local lens.

I want to round off by paying a special tribute to my fellow Officers, who have both worked so hard and provided unwavering support throughout this unparalleled presidency.

To Daniella, you have been an absolute force to be reckoned with, and you brought the perfect mix of strength, tenacity and kindness when you supported the profession through those early, unsettling weeks when the first lockdown came into play, and beyond. You've been a brilliant colleague, friend and confidante to so many of us, and we wish you all the very best safe in the knowledge that you'll throw yourself into

whatever your future endeavours may be.

In handing over to Justine Shotton I'm confident that we have a compassionate and experienced new President who cares very deeply about supporting the workforce, cross-species health and welfare and the role that we as vets can play in the One Health agenda. And on the cusp of COP26, I can think of no better time – and no better President – to take forward our work under the sustainability banner, considering where we fit into the big discussions, what more we as a profession can all be doing to protect the planet, and how we can inspire others to do the same.

From a personal perspective, thank you to my wife Natalie and our three girls Ella, Heidi and Libby. Not once during this year have any of them said 'do you have to do that now?' to me. They have perfectly understood my desire to give all I could to a one year role and have shared in that challenge with me. Frankly, I suspect they have some reservations about me having more time to kick footballs, coach their rowing crew, pass unhelpful comments on their music practice and definitely, to take more of my share of cooking dinner – something none of us will be pleased about!

As our focus moves to developing Natalie's burgeoning ambulatory business, I hope to be able to show similar reciprocal support.

While thinking of sentient beings I live with, I should of course also mention Ivy the dog, who helps me remember daily just why I became a farm animal vet in the first place!

My Mam and Dad are here today, and I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge, like so many families, the sacrifices they made to help me get to this point today. Whether it was the early starts to take me to the farm, the late evenings to collect me from seeing practice, the moral discussions we shared about paying for A-Level resits or the million other times they have supported my career, I know that without

them I could not have hoped to be anywhere near where I am today. From them comes the confidence to try, to not fear failure and to celebrate each others achievements.

Finally, I want to repeat my heartfelt thanks to BVA's staff, who have weathered the challenges of the last 18 months with grace and humour and worked so hard to make sure vets have a strong voice and are supported at every step of the way. I know it has been a hard year, but this small team should take immense pride from everything we have to show for it, from the outstanding member support to top-class policy positions and an enviable profile in the mainstream media. Every day I find myself refusing to take credit for something as I know that it's the result of someone else working so hard and with such dedication behind the scenes. For keeping me on my toes and on the TV, I am immensely grateful.

I started this speech saying what a shame it had been not to spend time with people in person for the vast majority of my presidency. While we're not all together now, it does at least feel reassuring that I'm speaking to you from Mansfield Street alongside fellow Officers and some of our staff, and recent weeks have started to feel like we're making those small steps towards a greater sense of interacting offscreen. I feel really hopeful of being able to see many more of you in the weeks to come, including at meetings, stakeholder events, London Vet Show in November and BVA Live, our new standalone conference in the Spring.

It has been a year like no other, and I can think of no role I would have preferred to hold during this year. It has been an immense honour to serve as BVA President every step of the way. Thank you for everything, and my very best wishes to Justine as she takes the reins.