

Speech to the BVA annual Scottish Dinner

Justine Shotton, President of the British Veterinary Association

Tuesday 17 May 2022 at the Scottish Parliament

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you, Romain. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us at our Scottish dinner. After a three-year hiatus, it's an absolute pleasure to welcome you all back to connect with friends and colleagues and enjoy what is always a calendar highlight for the veterinary community in Scotland.

We are sincerely grateful to Finlay Carson MSP for hosting us this evening. Finlay became one of our Honorary Associates last year, and we really value his ongoing support for the profession. I'd also like to thank Edward Mountain, who sends his apologies for the evening, and his 'Head of Office', Tricia Clark, for all her help in organising tonight's event.

We're also delighted that Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, is able to join us this evening, and look forward to hearing from her shortly. Mairi has been a true advocate for animal health and welfare in Scotland, and we really appreciate how engaged she has been with us and the wider veterinary profession.

BVA President's theme

My presidential theme for this year is sustainability, and I hope that you'll all agree that this is an issue of paramount importance which demands conviction and clarity of purpose from all sides.

As a vet working for a conservation-focused zoo, I believe that we each have a part to play in ensuring our practices are sustainable for the long-term, and that we need to find the balance to allow humans to thrive whilst supporting our wider ecosystems and all of the wonders they hold.

At BVA, much of our focus has revolved around harnessing the profession's deep-seated interest in sustainability and supporting members with practical tips for going greener within and beyond working life. And we're also looking seriously at the environmental impact of

some of the resources we use and the sectors we serve. Following on from our sustainable agriculture policy, we've recently launched a position on small animal parasiticides, and are working on an in-depth look at sustainability in the aquaculture industry.

This latter work takes as its starting point the need for vets to use and access current and new medicines as effectively as possible; we must encourage innovation and strike the right balance between high fish welfare and minimal environmental impact. As we develop our position on this important issue, the working group will be taking a deep dive into issues including husbandry, health and welfare, medicines use, and the role of technology.

Please do engage with us in all of our sustainability activity, and keep considering what we can all do at sector, organisational, and individual levels to help protect the planet.

Workforce

For the workforce to play its full part in the sustainability agenda, we need the workforce itself to be sustainable.

We can recognise and celebrate tonight the sterling efforts of veterinary teams in Scotland and across the UK to keep our animals healthy, keep the food chain moving, protect public health and uphold welfare standards, all against a backdrop of Brexit, Covid and an unprecedented surge in pet ownership.

But we also need to acknowledge that this has come at a significant – and ultimately unsustainable – cost to the profession's capacity and wellbeing. If we are going to cope with ongoing and new or unforeseen challenges ahead, we need action now to improve recruitment, retention and rates of return to veterinary work, to ensure that all existing vets can feel supported, safe and rewarded in their careers, and to encourage future vets from all walks of life to follow in our footsteps.

What we ask for from our parliamentarians in Scotland and Westminster is understanding and readiness to work with BVA and other stakeholders on measures that will mitigate against a rising tide of pressures that Brexit has placed on the workforce. This is particularly in relation to soaring demand for veterinary certification for products of animal origin, live farm animals and pets travelling to and from the UK.

We also ask decision-makers to ensure that the laudable moves to create new vet schools – such as SRUC's proposed new site - go hand in hand with extra funding and staffing. BVA is fully on board with SRUC's desire to shape its proposed new school in a way that addresses shortages, emphasises the importance of rural communities to Scotland's economy, and prioritises widening access for students from a diverse range of backgrounds. But to give these future vets the best shot at success, we must ensure that we aren't spreading existing resource too thin.

What we ask for from clients – both pet owners and animal keepers – is compassion and willingness to accept that your vet is doing their very best under unprecedented circumstances. At the height of lockdown, we launched the #RespectYourVet campaign, imploring for understanding that veterinary teams were having to make big changes and difficult decisions in order to keep colleagues and clients safe.

Nearly six in ten vets in Scotland told us that they'd experienced aggressive and intimidating behaviour from clients last year, and many have also seen levels of online abuse such as trolling and unfair reviews rise recently. The vast majority of clients have been understanding and supportive, but it's simply unacceptable that anyone should face abuse and threats just for doing their job.

What we ask for from the profession itself is a commitment to developing supportive working environments where the whole veterinary community can thrive. In the past year BVA has really pushed forward our good workplaces campaign, encouraging teams to sign up to our voluntary code, champion equality, and create spaces where everyone feels empowered and heard.

And what we ask for from the children and young people interested in following a veterinary career is to believe in yourself and give it a try! We were thrilled to work recently with the Scottish SPCA on 'Vetastic Adventures', a brilliant project that showcased veterinary careers in a fun and accessible way for both primary and secondary school pupils. An amazing 6,500 pupils engaged with the event on the day and that really speaks to the huge appetite and potential that we want to harness in our future vets. The key message to share is that vet schools are looking for tenacity, potential, and people skills, and there are many routes into a rewarding career.

Taken together, we feel confident that understanding and addressing these challenges will help to create a flexible, resilient and future-proofed workforce for the years to come.

Mental Health

Another challenge we face in the profession is poor mental health, stress and burn-out, and it's vital in these difficult times that we as a workforce look out for ourselves, our colleagues and our clients.

Help is available in the form of groups and agencies such as Vetsupport Scotland, Vetlife, the National Rural Mental Health Forum and Farmwell Scotland, and I'd also like to thank the Cabinet Secretary for her continued support and interest in addressing this issue. Hot on the heels of last week's Mental Health Awareness Week, it is really heartening to see such strong aspirations to help those affected by poor mental health in our profession and the communities we serve.

Surveillance

Our workforce has been tested in ways that no-one could have imagined, but I am immensely proud of how the veterinary community has pulled together to support one another, uphold animal health and welfare and confront multiple challenges head on.

This resilience and dedication has shone through in how vets have been monitoring and mitigating against disease outbreaks in Scotland and across the UK. In the case of the recent Avian Influenza epidemic, we are talking about the second biggest animal disease outbreak since Foot and Mouth, so the resource that has gone into implementing protective measures – as well as the emotional toll of the outbreak on vets and industry – is hugely significant.

I want to applaud all vets involved in protecting us and our animals from disease: from those on the farming frontline to others carrying out vital research, surveillance and testing. The threat of African Swine Fever reaching these shores is never far away, but in our surveillance networks we have dedicated and diligent individuals who make it their mission to keep us safe.

Scottish Veterinary Service

Disease control will form a large part of the remit of the planned Scottish Veterinary Service, as well as generating welcome new opportunities for careers in animal health or food safety.

We recognise the significant positives that a Scotland-centric approach could bring, to help really home-in on the animal health and welfare priorities that matter most here. BVA is also keen to see fish included within its scope, as we see benefits to having farmed fish brought into line with other livestock.

However, I don't have to tell any of you around the room tonight that diseases and animal welfare problems don't respect borders. It will therefore be critical that the new service has systems that collaborate and liaise with the rest of the UK, and beyond, on disease surveillance, data collection, and information sharing. We're engaging closely to ensure that veterinary expertise is at the heart of these new proposals.

Agricultural transition

Staying on the farming side, we recognise that the Scottish Government has an exciting opportunity to develop an innovative agricultural policy which supports an ambitious set of aims. However, we've cautioned that veterinary engagement is absolutely key as these plans develop, and animal health and welfare must be recognised as a desired outcome in its own right as well as being tightly intertwined with climate and productivity goals. We've had really positive conversations in recent weeks with the Cabinet Secretary, and look forward to feeding in further to ensure this opportunity is fully grasped.

Animal welfare legislation

Speaking of grasping opportunities, we're delighted that the Scottish Government plans to ban the sale and use of glue traps: legislation which may go further than the planned restrictions in England. There is no place for these inhumane devices, which subject trapped animals to prolonged pain and suffering and can often accidentally trap non-target species including cats and birds. Having signalled the commitment to banning glue traps, we'd like to see similar action against snares: devices which also can cause significant and needless harm to animals, including our pets and protected wildlife.

Pet welfare

Turning to pet welfare, companion animal vets in Scotland have needed to be particularly agile during the pandemic, as they have adjusted to new ways of working coupled with a surge in pet ownership. Unfortunately in many cases this has presented problems, with

some new owners placing looks over health in the breeds that they choose, and unscrupulous breeders prioritising profit over welfare.

In such difficult circumstances, I consider it a particular highlight that BVA and others successfully lobbied the UK Government to take action to curb the rise in dogs with cropped ears being imported to the UK, via our “Cut The Crop” campaign. This barbaric and purely cosmetic practice may not seem on the surface to be a major problem in Scotland, but we are well aware that left unchecked this could go in the wrong direction over time due to market forces and social media influence.

In recent months, BVA has been turning its attention to the deeply concerning emerging trend of canine fertility clinics, which seem to be spreading relentlessly in response to the soaring demand for puppies, particularly the popular flat-faced breeds which suffer higher welfare compromise. We are building a picture of the scale and severity of this worrying trend, and already seeing multiple red flags in the clinics, which may be operating with no regulation or veterinary oversight. The recent action taken against a clinic owner in Lanarkshire following a joint investigation exemplifies what can be achieved when we come together to clamp down on unregulated and dangerous practices.

Thank yous

Much of the activity and engagement that I’ve mentioned here could not have been achieved without the incredible energy, passion and commitment of my BVA Scottish Branch colleagues, ably led by the President, Romain Pizzi. Following the Branch AGM today, I want to give special thanks to two women who have taken the Branch from strength to strength over recent years with their boundless energy and enthusiasm for giving our Scottish members a strong voice. Thank you to Melissa Donald, our outgoing past President, and Kathleen Robertson, who finished her term as the Branch Senior Vice President earlier today.

I’d also like to extend a warm welcome to Gareth Hateley, who was formally voted in as the new Branch Junior Vice President this afternoon. Having chalked up 40 years as a BVA member and held an impressive range of roles in mixed practice, livestock health and the Civil Service, Gareth has a wealth of expertise to bring to championing animal health and welfare and the Scottish veterinary community.

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

If everyone would please rise, and raise your glasses in a toast to Scotland's veterinary community. [Toast]

Thank you and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening. I would now like to invite Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, to speak.