

Speech to the BVA annual Welsh Dinner

Justine Shotton, President of the British Veterinary Association

Tuesday 5 July 2022 at Cardiff City Hall

Thank you, Collin. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us at our Welsh 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 Wales.

We are very grateful that Lesley Griffiths, the Rural Affairs Minister, is able to join us this evening for dinner, following a very positive meeting with her earlier today. We're also hugely grateful to Christine Glossop for delivering the next speech for us. I'll be saying more about Christianne later on, but for now I want to use this opportunity to voice sincere thanks on behalf of BVA's Officers, Welsh Branch, staff and members in Wales for all of her support over nearly two decades as Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales.

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 UK sustainable animal 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.

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 Wales 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. In Wales, there was sterling collaboration during the pandemic between the Welsh Government, Chief Veterinary Office, farming and veterinary sectors to help everyone navigate lockdown and keep pace with new restrictions and working practices.

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 Wales 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 and course places – including in Aberystwyth - go hand in hand with extra funding and staffing. BVA has strong links with Aberystwyth and is fully on board with its strong focus on farm vet training and support for projects around AMR, bovine TB and diagnostics. But to give its cohorts of 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.

Ninety per cent of vets in Wales told us that their teams had 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 diversity, 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 want those with potential to recognise that in order to get accepted you don't need all A*s or family members who you can follow into the profession; what counts is 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.

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 really shone through in how vets have been monitoring and mitigating against disease threats in Wales 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.

The Bovine TB response has also remained robust, and we welcomed the general direction of travel when the Welsh Government consulted on its refreshed eradication programme earlier in the year. Steps towards more informed biosecurity considerations when purchasing cattle, changes to the testing regime, increased information sharing and improvements to the compensation regime all help to strengthen our lines of defence against this devastating disease. Moving forward, it's imperative that those at the frontline of these efforts – particularly farmers and private vets – feel empowered to take bold steps forward on TB control, with good trust and lines of communication between themselves and government.

AMR

There is also a huge amount of good recent work in Wales to celebrate when it comes to tackling another significant threat to both animal and public health: that of antimicrobial resistance. Thanks to projects such as Arwain Vets Cymru and Arwain DGC building on the latter's pioneering work, Wales has been really leading the way on efforts to control and prevent the spread of resistance in animals and the environment. All those who join us tonight who have been involved in this big success story should be very proud of what's been achieved to date, and we are looking forward to continuing to work collaboratively on this important issue.

With most recent highlights including the development of an app to help identify biosecurity weak spots on farm, there is a huge amount of innovation afoot and a commendable One Health approach to preserving these essential medicines for both humans and animals in the future.

Agricultural transition

Staying on the farming side, we recognise that the Welsh Government has an exciting opportunity through the Sustainable Farming Scheme to develop an innovative agricultural policy which supports an ambitious set of aims. However, we've cautioned that animal health and welfare must be absolutely central to regulatory reforms, and it will be critical to involve vets – the most trusted advisors to farmers – as standards and monitoring take shape.

We've had some really positive conversations on this in recent times with Rural Affairs Minister Lesley Griffiths, and noted some encouraging improvements, and it's great that two members of our Branch Council are now closely involved in the co-design of this policy. BVA stands ready to help however we can, to ensure the opportunity to cement a forward-looking, inclusive and truly sustainable policy is fully grasped.

Pet welfare

Turning to pet welfare, companion animal vets in Wales 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 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 some clinics, which may be operating with no regulation or veterinary oversight. I know that many vets and dog welfare organisations in Wales such as Hope Rescue are getting increasingly worried about this trend too. Please rest assured that we are committed to working together to do whatever we can to clamp down on unregulated and dangerous practices.

It takes a lot of collaboration and commitment to tackle some of the biggest pet welfare challenges ahead, which is why I'm really reassured that the Welsh Government stands so ready to engage with the veterinary profession and make progress across many of the most pressing issues. That includes a pledge to make improvements to dog breeding regulations, and the all-important communications push with prospective owners about the responsibilities and costs that come hand-in-hand with taking on an animal. And moving away from our furry friends, we see it as a big win for snake welfare that the Minister quickly took on board our call for recognising the evidence base on the minimum vivarium size required to meet welfare needs. It's a shining example of what can be achieved when we all set ourselves stretching targets!

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 Welsh Branch colleagues, ably led by the President, Collin Willson.

Throughout the unprecedented challenges of recent years, Branch members have been completely committed to supporting colleagues and ensuring that there is a strong voice for the Welsh veterinary community on the issues that matter most. Please do contact Collin, 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 Wales's veterinary community. [Toast]

And as a final note of thanks, and before I hand over to her, please can we also toast Christianne Glossop in appreciation of everything she has done for vets in Wales during a long and dedicated career. [Second Toast]

Christianne, as part of preparing this speech we asked some of those who have worked most closely with you for their reflections on their time with you and everything you have achieved for the profession. Collin's response summed it up: "what do you say about someone who is almost a legend in their lifetime, and who has changed the animal health and welfare landscape in Wales in every way?"

We'd be eating our dinner after midnight if we listed all the highlights, but to name just a few, my colleagues have voiced particular appreciation for all your hard work and collaborative spirit on areas including AMR, One Health and disease control, but most of all what a supportive and inspiring presence you have been to them throughout.

You are a true champion of the veterinary profession and someone who shares our strong conviction that cross-species animal health and welfare must be at the heart of all relevant policy. This has also seen you consistently pushing public understanding of the critical role that vets play in animal health and welfare, food production and public health in Wales, and the need for them to be supported, celebrated and called on regularly for their expertise.

Christianne herself told us that past BVA President Freda Scott-Park said of her: “If you cut Christianne in half you would see the word VET written through the middle”, and this has been abundantly apparent over the years. What really shone through in the feedback was how dedicated you are to championing the profession, celebrating successes, getting to know everyone in the Welsh veterinary community, and nurturing the next generation.

And finally, we’ve heard that your appetite for novel challenges extends outside of professional life – as well as undertaking numerous hikes across Wales you’ve also thrown yourself into having a go on the mid-Wales zipwire!

As a token of our gratitude, we will be recommending Christianne for Life Membership of BVA. This is a top-tier honour that we bestow on individuals who have given long and valuable support to BVA and worked tirelessly to support and champion the veterinary profession. Christianne, this is something that you truly embody thanks to nearly two decades serving the Welsh veterinary community. Thank you for everything, and we’d like to wish you all the very best in your future endeavours.

[Presentation of gift and flowers]

Thank you and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening. I would now like to invite Christianne to speak.