

Members' Day Speech, Justine Shotton, BVA President

29 September 2022

As delivered

Thank you, David.

The last few years have been extremely challenging and 2022 also gave the profession its fair share of difficult obstacles to navigate.

The devastating war in Ukraine and the struggles facing the Ukrainian people is a humanitarian tragedy we never thought we'd see the like of again here in Europe. In its wake comes a fresh wave of social and economic upheaval that is being acutely felt here in the UK by us all. We are only now starting to see the impacts of rocketing fuel and food prices, which are predicted to drive down standards of living to levels we've not seen in the UK for over 50 years.

I know that those of you who are in practice will already be seeing these impacts first-hand, as the exceptional growth of pet ownership experienced during the pandemic is met by tight household budgets. Our members in practice are telling us that they are seeing increasing numbers of serious cases of poor animal welfare that could have been prevented if owners had been able to take preventative measures or sought help sooner. We know these difficult decisions are having an impact on the wellbeing of vet teams, who are already facing extreme workforce pressures.

There are also serious concerns for our food and farming sectors. Costs are going up, but as people seek to make their money stretch just to cover the basics, retailers are seeking cheaper prices, and consumers are leaning towards cheaper, in some cases lower welfare products, and there is a concern this will lead to a wider lowering of animal welfare standards.

Sadly, the cost-of-living crisis is a problem likely only to escalate, as people are forced to make difficult choices in the face of financial hardship. We are using our media profile to share essential information to pet owners to help alleviate some of the issues seen by the veterinary professions, encouraging regular check-ups and urging owners to speak to their vet about the right course of action early on, should they have financial concerns.

Good veterinary workplaces

One of the biggest challenges facing the veterinary profession is chronic staff shortages. At BVA we are pushing government to make it easier for vets to come and work in the UK but there is more that practices can do. This year, as part of our Good Veterinary Workplaces initiative, that you've heard a little about already, we launched our Flexible Working campaign. It encourages employers to consider flexible working for staff in a bid to retain team members who might otherwise leave and to attract more people to the profession. We recognise that this isn't always easy for practices that operate long hours, but it has real potential to help with retention as people look for ways improve work-life balance, as well as manage caring commitments, and enhance mental and physical well-being.

Sustainability

When I chose my presidential theme of 'sustainability' I knew it was of vital importance. As a vet working for a conservation-focussed zoo, this is an area I've always been passionate about. Supporting the profession to explore and implement new ways to become environmentally sustainable in all of its actions was a challenge I was keen to embrace and I knew it was only a matter of time before we saw these devastating effects on our planet that science has predicted.

This year, the severe effects of global climate change impacted our lives as individuals here in the UK in increasingly obvious ways. With the hottest temperatures ever recorded in the UK combined with little rainfall, rivers and reservoirs became dramatically depleted. Over the summer, our farmers were forced to feed their animals winter food stock, signalling potential shortages as we move into the colder months. Also, many animals of all species have suffered the effects of this unprecedented and indiscriminate heat and drought, including wildlife, farm animals, horses and pets.

As vets, we care passionately about the environment and the animals within it, and we are among the most ardent champions of the natural world. You told us that you wanted to do more but often felt paralysed and overwhelmed by the enormity of the crisis. Throw in heavy workloads, lack of capacity and stretched finances, and it is understandable that sustainability can end up as less of a priority.

At BVA, we listened. I'm incredibly proud of the work this year we've done to provide you, the veterinary profession, with much needed, practical support to help vet teams make meaningful and manageable changes in their workplaces. Not only are these practical solutions tools for busy vets to make effective change, but they are also evidence-based and in the vast majority of cases present financial savings, as well, for veterinary businesses too. I'm delighted to say that in response, you, the profession stepped up.

Ongoing engagement with our new resources and the #GreenTeamVet campaign is fantastic. Our Greener Veterinary Practice Checklist webinar series with Vet Sustain and VDS training exceeded expectations, and I've been thrilled to see practical changes already taking place throughout the profession.

I'm hearing of practices cutting waste-to-landfill, reducing their anaesthetic gas usage, adopting more reusable consumables and reducing packaging and surgical waste. These may seem like small changes but when combined, they do have a big impact.

At BVA, it is hugely important to us to also become sustainable ourselves and to lead by example, and it was fantastic to hear David outlining how we've achieved our Investors in the Environment, Silver accreditation last year. I'm incredibly proud of the team for this achievement and of the ongoing work in achieving our full Green award this year.

Just this month, we launched a new resource to help the profession consider the use of small animal parasiticides, which, like other medicines, can have negative impacts on the environment. Our new five point plan is helping vets and clients to address these risks, recommending vets take a proportionate, targeted and responsible approach to the use of small animal parasiticides, carefully weighing up all factors before prescribing or recommending treatment. We hope it will also be helpful to help educate clients in practice, so they too can reduce unnecessary use.

We continue to raise awareness of the great work of the UK's farm assurance schemes through our #ChooseAssured campaign. This encourages consumers to take a 'less and better' approach when it comes to purchasing meat and other animal products, so they consider purchasing higher-welfare products less frequently, particularly at a time when people are increasingly concerned about the price of their weekly shop. This is one of the many ways we continue to advocate for higher animal welfare standards as well as helping to protect the environment.

We are also currently developing our policy position on sustainable aquaculture, which we hope will have a significant impact on the welfare of fish as well as benefits to the wider environment and the team look forward to sharing details of this soon.

Animal welfare campaigning

My other passion alongside sustainability is improving animal welfare for all species. As the UK unpicks the legislative fallout of Brexit and the impact on animal health and welfare, a huge win this year was the passing of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) bill into law in April which BVA had long campaigned for.

We continue to champion the passage of the Kept Animals Bill through Parliament; lobbying hard over the summer to ensure it wasn't lost while the Government was in hiatus and with the new ministerial teams now in place, we will maintain pressure on the Government to deliver on its commitment to this vital bill, the absence of which continues unnecessary suffering for animals.

Our #CutTheCrop campaign is raising awareness of the necessity of this legislation and aims positively influencing consumer behaviour to help end the demand for dogs with cropped ears. The Kept Animals Bill will go further to tackle the issue by bringing about a complete ban of imported dogs with cropped ears.

We're continuing to challenge the unscrupulous breeding of pets for profit over welfare with our #BreedToBreathe campaign and ongoing collaborative efforts as part of the Brachycephalic Working Group.

We've also seen the deeply concerning trend of canine fertility clinics spreading rapidly in response to soaring demand for puppies, particularly the popular flat-faced breeds. We're building a picture of the scale and intensity of this worrying trend, and already seeing multiple red flags in some areas, with some clinics operating with no veterinary oversight at all. I know that many vets and dog welfare organisations are increasingly worried about this trend and we are committed to working together to do whatever we can to help clamp down on all unregulated and dangerous practices.

Telemedicine

As with many aspects of life, the pandemic accelerated radical changes to the way the veterinary profession went about its day-to-day business. The growth of telemedicine and remote consulting has continued at pace. And now that the immediate threat of Covid-19 has passed, it's right that we take a moment to assess how we approach remote practices. Telemedicine has the potential to be transformative for the veterinary profession, but if we are to ensure thorough patient care it must operate from a solid foundation of an established vet-client-patient relationship. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons has just concluded its consultation into its review of under care in the profession and we look forward to seeing their recommendations.

BVA Live

I couldn't reflect on my incredible year as BVA President without talking about our inaugural BVA Live conference at the NEC in Birmingham in June. I know many of you were able to join us and take part in some of the diverse range of sessions on offer.

For me, and many others, the buzz at the event was energising and inspiring. Gathering together, as we are again today, is so important. It's important for us both personally and also as a profession, where it provides a vital opportunity to engage, learn, and debate and develop our thinking, knowledge and skills. We must continue to find space to challenge our assumptions, share our experiences and celebrate our successes, so that the profession can continue to evolve and grow.

I'm really delighted to confirm that also BVA Live will return in May next year and I hope to see you all there.

Looking forward

As I look forward, the veterinary profession continues to face many challenges -possibly the biggest being workforce capacity; this is a ticking timebomb that urgently needs addressing. Malcolm Morley becomes President today and we will hear from him shortly on his priorities, of which people is a core focus. I very much look forward to supporting him as Senior Vice President with this vital work.

Thank yous

And finally, a few people I'd like to thank for supporting me throughout the year.

Firstly, a huge thank you to Steve Anderson Dixon, the Chairman and the board of directors for their unwavering support and patience. Being BVA President is a steep learning curve and I couldn't have navigated my way through the variety of challenges over the last year without their guidance.

I'd also like to thank David Galpin and all of my exceptional colleagues on BVA staff that I have been lucky enough to work with over the last few years. The team at BVA are such a passionate and talented group of individuals, achieving so much by so few, and always with a smile. I thank them all for the support and encouragement they have shown me and I'm excited that I will be able to continue working with such a fantastic, collaborative and inclusive team for another year.

A special thank you also to our former Director of Policy, Media and Strategy, Sally Burnell who was a personal inspiration and support to me, and so many officers before me, and we all miss her.

A huge thank you to our Council and Committee Members, as well as our divisions, for their incredible insight and dedication to shaping such well-considered and robust policy, which forms the foundations of everything we do at BVA. I'm particularly pleased with the strategic work we are doing now with BVNA to protect the title of Veterinary Nurse and look forward to seeing that develop over the coming year.

Thank you to our branches in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who ensure the policy we develop also works effectively in the devolved nations.

Of course, a big thank you to you, our members. Without you, your contributions, and your faith in us, BVA wouldn't be able to do the work it does.

I would like to say a special thank you to my parents who I'm so grateful can be here today, for all of their support for as long as I can remember in making my childhood dream of becoming a vet into a reality. They inspired me both in terms of the sciences and the arts, in equal measure, but I think both of which were really important ingredients for being a vet. Whether it was taking me to riding lessons, puppy training, sponsored walks for WWF or so many years of university and vet events in various locations, I definitely wouldn't have had such a wonderful career and so many amazing experiences helping animals if it wasn't for their encouragement and sacrifices.

A huge thank you also to my brother Jamie for always keeping me smiling throughout and to my amazing partner Matthew, who can't be here today. He is also an avid animal lover, who regularly teaches me things about animals, and I'd like to thank him for his fantastic support over these last few very busy months.

And finally...

And finally...I'm incredibly proud of my year as President and I'd like to thank you all for believing in me. It's been a privilege to lead such a dedicated team; we've achieved a great deal and made real and lasting improvements to sustainability and animal welfare while supporting and developing the profession we all love. But there is still much to do. When James concluded his year as President, I recall his remarks that the year had been a year like no other. Once again the profession has been operating against a another year of extreme challenges and I have no doubt there will be more ahead.

However, despite the continued stressors of an uncertain future, I feel reassured and confident to hand over the reins to Malcolm. He will be an energetic and passionate champion for you all and the issues you face. I look forward to working with fellow officers to meet the challenges ahead, and I know that together, as a profession, we will rise to every challenge.