

Speech to the BVA Annual Scottish Dinner

Malcolm Morley, President of the British Veterinary Association

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AS DELIVERED

Thank you so much, Gareth. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the British Veterinary Association's annual Scottish dinner. Thank you so much for joining us.

We are sincerely grateful to Edward Mountain MSP for hosting us this evening. Edward has, for many years, been one of BVA's Honorary Members, and we truly value his ongoing support of our profession. I'd also like to say a particular "thank you" to Edward's 'Head of Office', Tricia Clark, for all her help in organising tonight's event.

We're delighted that George Burgess, the Scottish Government's Director of Agriculture and Rural Economy, is able to join us this evening, and look forward to hearing from him shortly.

Tonight, I'm just going to cover four key issues because were all that stand between you and your supper:

- Workforce challenges and the veterinary profession in Scotland
- Reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act
- The role of vets in agricultural transition
- And Sustainable aquaculture

But first, I want to say what a pleasure it is to be here. Scotland genuinely holds a special place in my heart — my wife Poppy and I were married in Edinburgh and then spent our honeymoon winter hill climbing on Skye, and that's not because that's the only thing we could afford. And we've spent many holidays since exploring much

of Scotland, on foot and by boat, including the very wildest parts of the highlands and islands.

As many of you will know, the veterinary profession has been under significant pressure in recent years, with workforce shortages in all sectors. However, the situation is particularly challenging in remote and rural Scotland, with only a limited number of graduates looking to work and settle in such areas, despite the key role the veterinary profession plays in these local communities — supporting agriculture, food production and boosting the rural economy.

One way to tackle this shortage is through the provision of inclusive veterinary education which helps to break down the economic, educational and social barriers which exist for students wishing to enter our profession.

Scotland has long been at the forefront of veterinary education and is home to two of the oldest veterinary schools in the UK, (with Edinburgh celebrating its 200 year anniversary this year). The exciting development of SRUC's School of Veterinary Medicine is timely, offering a new model and aiming to increase access to the profession and encourage graduates to stay in rural areas once qualified — complimenting the impressive work already underway in Scotland's existing vet schools.

However, more than ever, it's crucial that the Scottish Funding Council provides the necessary financial support. The reality is that current funding per Scottish vet student doesn't meet the cost of providing this education — and while the vet schools have been increasingly resourceful in implementing innovative models, the future of veterinary education in Scotland sits on a precipice if sustainable long-term funding is not assured.

And it's not only the future of veterinary education which is facing immense challenges. We can't build the veterinary teams we need on the foundations of outdated legislation which is no longer fit for purpose—the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 — an Act which is well and truly in “extra time”. My presidential theme is about investing in people and vets don't work in isolation. We are closely supported by

others — such as vet techs, musculoskeletal professionals and equine dental technicians. But the current Act doesn't recognise these important roles or enable us to embrace the full potential of the wider veterinary team.

Did you know that currently any of you in this room could go to work describing yourself as a veterinary nurse. This is because there is no legal protection for that title, which is quite extraordinary and misleading given the expertise and training of these colleagues— it must be rectified.

Investing in People is not just about investing in vets - and that's coming from a vet - but the wider team we lead, and we urge you to join us and lobby Defra for legislative reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act to bring about this much needed UK-wide change.

In Scotland, we're encouraged by the potential of plans to develop a Scottish Veterinary Service which aims to support animal health and welfare, food safety and food production — all key parts of the One Health agenda. We understand the latest proposals will be presented to Ministers in the next few weeks.

Money invested in animal health and national biosecurity goes so much further by also supporting human health, the environment, and the sustainability and productivity of our food sector. Investment in the people and infrastructure of public sector veterinary services is therefore fundamental for Scotland.

The Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme is an important example of this. The scheme supports the veterinary provision to crofting communities and its funding must be maintained or we risk losing all veterinary care in these areas. I learnt today that is that it has been going for over a hundred years.

At this point I'd like to pay a particular thank you to Freda Scott-Park - where is Freda? There's Freda, I'm going to embarrass her by pointing her out - for her outstanding work as HIVSS coordinator. Freda has made the difficult decision to stand down after many years in the role and her expertise will be greatly missed.

Thank you so much Freda. She's done so much more than just be the HIVSS coordinator.

One Health also focuses on the intersection between animal health and the environment. The Agricultural Transition Policy in Scotland will pave the way for a sustainable and prosperous farming and food sector that contributes to a net-zero carbon economy by 2045.

The new agricultural policy offers the opportunity to harness the unique and trusted relationship which exists between vets and farmers, that Edward described in his shed earlier - empowering collaboration to drive positive outcomes on all levels.

Central to this is developing sustainable agricultural practices that minimise environmental impact and prioritise animal health and welfare. Agriculture cannot be considered sustainable if it is achieved at an unacceptable cost to animal welfare. Good animal health and welfare plays a significant role in achieving climate and productivity goals and must also be recognised as a desired outcome in its own right.

To enable this, we must ensure there is veterinary engagement and representation on key bodies such as the Agriculture Reform Implementation Oversight Board, AREOB, and safeguard animal health and welfare as a central component of agricultural transition — alongside our custodianship of the land.

Finally, with aquaculture being one of the UK's key strategic food production sectors, particularly here in Scotland, I would like to highlight the recent publication of BVA's position on UK sustainable finfish aquaculture.

This forward-looking policy was developed by a panel of veterinary experts, including the Fish Veterinary Society—in collaboration with regulators, government, industry representatives and other key stakeholders. It recognises the challenges of sustainability in finfish aquaculture and sets out our vision for sustainable development and the need to fully consider welfare.

Vets play a critical role in taking a truly One Health approach to aquaculture. Our new policy highlights the key role that innovation plays in improving sustainability — from monitoring health and welfare to improved use of medicines and vaccines. And

through active collaboration with other stakeholders, together we can collectively drive improvements to the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the sector.

We're calling for dynamic, consolidated regulation, with a more joined up approach to how new and existing fish farms achieve consent to build on a new site. We are also calling for improved research and development in the aquaculture sector – particularly around issues like the measurement of welfare outcomes and welfare at the time of slaughter.

Parliamentarians please help us:

During the evening we would like to hear your thoughts on how we can best support you and collaborate to bring about these important areas.

- We need sustainable provision of inclusive veterinary education that is focused on the people we need to support the future of Scotland's agrifood economy, yet the funding of veterinary education is on a precipice. I particularly urge you to address this important issue and ensure that funding is made available.
- Reform of the outdated Veterinary Surgeons Act is essential for the future of our profession and veterinary teams. It will also improve animal welfare. We urge you to support our ask — help us lobby Defra to deliver this much-needed reform.
- Veterinary engagement will be key to successfully developing Scotland's agricultural policy, which must support animal health & welfare and sustainability. We encourage you to ensure there is adequate veterinary representation on relevant bodies such as the Agriculture Reform Implementation Oversight Board.

- Improving funding for research and development is needed to improve the sustainability of finfish aquaculture and should be prioritised by the Scottish Government.

Finally, I would like to thank you, a very big thank you, to Romain Pizzi for all he has done for BVA's Scottish Branch during his term as President, and welcome Gareth Hateley to his new role as BVA Scottish Branch President. Gareth has a wealth of experience, having held roles in mixed practice, livestock health and the Civil Service. He is a great asset to BVA. Thank you, Gareth.

I'll also add a huge thank you to all my colleagues, many of you who are in this room, who are part of BVA Scottish Branch. Their energy, commitment and expertise are hugely valued.

If everyone would please rise and raise your glasses to a toast, I'll grab my glass, to "BVA Scottish Branch and to Scotland's veterinary community". Thank you.

Thank you very much and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening. I will now hand over to George Burgess, the Scottish Government's Director of Agriculture and Rural Economy. Thank you George.