

Wednesday 30 April 2025

British Veterinary Association Annual Scotland Dinner 2025

President Dr. Elizabeth Mullineaux speech

Thank you very much Vivienne and welcome to your first dinner as BVA Scottish Branch President. I am really looking forward to working with you - you are going to be great and we have got two years to work together, so that would be fantastic.

Distinguished guests, it's my great pleasure to welcome you to the British Veterinary Association's annual Scottish dinner and to those of you from south of the border, welcome to Edinburgh. I'm very proud to call the Lothians home. I'm a Dick vet graduate twice over- though I hear there are other vet schools- and I have lived in East Lothian for the last 20 years. There are few more beautiful cities in the world than Edinburgh.

I'd like to extend a special welcome and a big thank you to Jim Fairlie MSP, Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, our guest speaker this evening. BVA works really closely with the Scottish Government on many important issues including animal health and welfare, Scotland's

biosecurity, disease prevention and One health, ensuring the views of the veterinary profession are represented.

The veterinary profession continues to face many challenges. These include the threat of emerging diseases such as bluetongue 3, avian influenza, and Foot and Mouth disease in Europe. We also continue to struggle with workforce pressures particularly in some cohorts of the veterinary profession, including in food safety and in rural and remote areas.

This evening, I am going to focus on three key areas: first, devolved Scottish animal welfare legislation; and then two issues that sit with the Westminster government, which we know you don't have direct impact on, but we would ask for your support on- the much needed reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, and our ongoing work to support the profession with the Competition and Markets Authority investigation into UK veterinary services for households pets. Whilst we appreciate these aren't devolved matters, they will have an impact on vets and vet teams in Scotland.

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BVA is committed to supporting the veterinary profession and to promoting animal health and welfare, which is a real priority for our members. We are really pleased with the progress taking place in the Scottish Parliament with two key bills: The Welfare of Dogs Act and The Dog Theft Bill.

The Welfare of Dogs Act was introduced by Christine Grahame, who sadly can't be with us this evening, but it's recently attained Royal Assent. The Act seeks to improve the health and wellbeing of dogs by encouraging responsible ownership and providing for the registration of unlicensed litters. We asked MSPs to support this Act, by sending them a briefing ahead of stage 3 and we really look forward to working with the Scottish Government on the Act's Code of Practice.

We also support the Dog Theft Bill introduced by our friend Maurice Golden - who is here this evening, but we hear won't be in future years, which is really sad. We have met Maurice several times to discuss the Bill. The Bill is a vital step toward ensuring dogs are better protected under Scottish law, strengthening the legal framework around dog theft, which will not only enhance animal welfare but also offer greater reassurance to the public that the bond between dogs and their owners is respected and safeguarded.

While these two key bills will go a long way towards ensuring the welfare of dogs, there are other issues that we would like to be considered, including a ban on aversive training methods such as shock collars. In 2018, the Scottish Government issued guidance making it clear that the use of this type of device may constitute an offence of unnecessary suffering under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act (2006), so banning the use and sale of shock collars would be the logical next step. BVA has long called for a complete ban on the sale and use of electric shock collars for dogs and cats to protect animal welfare. With next year's election on the horizon, this will be a key piece of animal welfare legislation that we urge you to include in your respective manifestos to ensure animal health and welfare continues to be at the forefront of Scottish politics.

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A new Veterinary Surgeons Act is essential, both to ensure animal health and welfare and to support the veterinary professions in delivering care. It is crucial that we have a fit-for-purpose, modern regulatory framework that recognises the importance of all members of the veterinary team and the modern structures of veterinary businesses.

BVA has long campaigned for legislative reform, urging the UK government to replace the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 which is woefully outdated. It's about as old as me! The Act fails to legally protect the title of 'veterinary nurse', despite the fact that these highly trained professionals are vital members of our practice teams. It also fails to recognise the importance of other allied professionals, such as equine dental technicians, musculoskeletal professionals and vet techs, and it doesn't embrace the full potential of the wider team.

Notably, the current Veterinary Surgeons Act does not regulate veterinary practices, meaning that individual vets and nurses are held accountable for business decisions which are often outside their control, but can directly impact animal health and welfare. The CMA has already acknowledged this failing in its current investigation, outlining the changes that the industry has undergone in the past 60 years and the challenges resulting from the absence of practice regulation. We are pleased that both the CMA and the UK Government have listened to the profession, and we are working at the moment with Defra to ensure that legislative reform is progressed promptly and efficiently.

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The ongoing Competition and Markets Authority investigation into UK veterinary services for household pets has also acknowledged the commitment of vets and vet nurses to pet owners and their animals, but it creates some possible issues for us around the 'remedies' that the CMA may propose to ensure healthy competition and consumer choice. Although the investigation is focussed on household pets, it is really likely that will impact on all types of veterinary practice, including large animal and mixed species practices such as those found particularly in the rural areas of Scotland. We need to ensure the consequences of the CMA investigation are understood beyond small animal practices and we continue to warn the CMA of the possibility of unforeseen impacts on the viability of remote rural practices in particular if its remedies are not carefully considered.

We've urged the CMA to ensure that the proposed changes, including those relating to medicines, are carefully considered and introduced in a way that allows vet businesses to adapt, as well as avoiding unintended consequences and increased pressure on veterinary profession. We do, however, recognise the need for change, and we are extremely proud of the veterinary profession's response to the investigation as we have remained open and willing to engage with the process, playing our part in supporting a well-functioning veterinary market.

We were able to expand on these concerns last month in a formal hearing with the CMA. This in-person meeting was an important opportunity to represent the views of the professions, both vets and nurses, and influence the CMA's thinking before it publishes its draft proposed remedies in April. Those draft remedies are actually going to be published at 7 o'clock tomorrow morning I believe.

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During the evening, we would like to hear your thoughts on how best we can support and work with you to continue ensuring that the role of veterinary surgeons is understood and valued, and to support the future of the veterinary profession in Scotland.

Scotland's veterinary professionals are known for their expertise, compassion, and dedication, and Scotland is home to some of the world's leading veterinary schools and research institutes, which continue to innovate in animal health, making the profession here both dynamic and forward-thinking. Today is a day to celebrate our remarkable profession and our colleagues in Scotland.

So now, if everyone would like to rise and raise your glasses, I would like to propose a toast to the future of the Scottish veterinary profession.

[Toast]

It's now my great pleasure to hand over to Jim Fairlie, Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity.

Thank you.