Member of Scottish Parliament (MPS), Finlay Carson

Good evening, everybody. You're all very well behaved. Normally, it takes more than two chaps of a wine glass to call you to order, but it's maybe because we're now being joined by the presiding officer, and he doesn't take any nonsense whatsoever. Good evening, everybody, and can I begin by extending a very warm welcome to all of you at your Scottish Parliament for this annual British Veterinary Association dinner? Absolutely, one highlight, one of the highlights of the Parliament of the year. For those who don't know me, I'm Finlay Carson, MSP, and proud to be an honorary associate of the BVA. So it's a genuine pleasure to host you this evening and to welcome colleagues, our fellow MSPs, friends, and guests from across Scotland's veterinary profession, following in the footsteps of my predecessor John Scott and more recently Edward Mountain, who had the pleasure of sponsoring this event.

I would also like to extend a particular welcome to BVA Scottish Branch President Vivienne Mackinnon, BVA President Gwen Rees, and to the Minister who is joining us tonight, Jim Fairlie, who we're going to hear from a little bit later this evening. Veterinary professionals play an essential role in Scotland's urban and rural communities alike, whether supporting livestock farmers, caring for beloved pets, safeguarding equine welfare, protecting public health, or advancing scientific research. Your work often goes unseen by the wider public, yet its importance certainly can't be overstated. As a former farmer and former convenor of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and as someone who represents one of Scotland's largest and most rural constituencies, I know first-hand just how important veterinary expertise is to our economy, our environment, and to our communities. Indeed, over the past year, that role has been brought into particular sharp focus through the challenges posed by bluetongue. In my own constituency of Galway and Western Free, farmers were understandably concerned as restrictions were introduced and the threat of disease spread northwards. Throughout that period, vets were not simply treating animals; they were advising businesses, explaining complex guidance, helping farmers manage uncertainty, and providing trusted professional leadership at a difficult time. That experience reminded us that all disease preparedness and resilience depends on strong partnerships. Government, industry, researchers, farmers, and vets each have a role to play. Only together can lessons be learnt and it's clear that no one group can succeed in isolation.

It's also reinforced the importance of maintaining a sustainable veterinary profession. Across Scotland, particularly in our rural and island communities, access to veterinary services cannot be taken for granted. The work being undertaken to support recruitment, training, and retention is therefore hugely important, as is ensuring young people continue to see veterinary medicine as an attractive and rewarding career. I

know many of you have also been closely engaged in discussions around responsible antibiotic use, animal welfare standards, disease surveillance, and education. These are not simply professional interests; they're a matter of national importance, which affects food production, public confidence, and long-term resilience of Scottish agriculture.

At the same time, it's right to recognise the demands placed upon those working within the profession. Veterinary medicine can be extremely rewarding, but it can also be extremely challenging and stressful. The growing focus on well-being and valuable work of organisations such as VetLife and FarmStrong remind us that supporting those who care for animals is every bit as important as delivering care to those animals themselves. One of the things I've always valued about the veterinary profession is its willingness to engage constructively, whether discussing disease control, animal welfare, rural services, or education, vets constantly and consistently bring a practical perspective, rooted in evidence, experience, and a genuine commitment to achieve the best outcomes. That spirit of collaboration will be essential as we address the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. This evening provides a huge opportunity not only to recognise the remarkable contribution made by vet professionals across Scotland, but also to celebrate relationships and partnerships that help make that contribution possible. On behalf of the Scottish Parliament, my MSP colleagues here, thank you for everything you do for animal health, welfare, agriculture, public health, and our rural communities. I do hope you enjoy the evening because it is one of the very best evenings we have in the Parliament here.

And I'm delighted to pass over to Vivienne.

BVA Scottish Branch President, Vivienne Mackinnon

Thanks, Finlay, for hosting the dinner tonight, and also for supporting our wonderful veterinary profession here in Scotland. And congratulations to all the MSPs who were elected or re-elected in May this year, especially those of you who have taken the time to come along tonight to hear about the successes and challenges that we face here in Scotland. One of the things, as exercised recently, was that islanders on Coll and Tiree were left without access to veterinary services when their vet retired. And so we assisted them in navigating the setup of the first community-owned vet practice in the UK, which opened in February this year, restoring essential veterinary services on the islands. We also asked the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission to consider the ongoing welfare challenges for sheep on St Kilda, and are really pleased to see that they have now reported with recommendations for managing the welfare of feral and free-living animals in Scotland.

The updated welfare of equids guidance has also been published, following extensive work with equine experts and vets, and applying the five welfare domains model, reflecting that animals should really have a life worth living, and preferably a good life, rather than merely aiming for the previous five freedoms from negative welfare indicators. We also welcome the joint UK consultation proposing an end to carbon dioxide stunning of pigs at slaughter and replacement with more humane alternatives. And hope that a consultation to improve the welfare of farrowing sows soon follows. Having said all that, as vets we often become more impassioned about improving animal welfare than looking after our own well-being, as Finlay has alluded to. And this, combined with ever increasing expectations of veterinary care, the cost-of-living crisis impacting on clients' ability to pay for that care, as there is no NHS for pets, vets can often be left under enormous amounts of pressure, trying to do the right thing for the animal and its owner, and sadly, the impacts of that are all too well known in the profession.

As of this year, the RCVS expects all veterinary practices to have a suicide prevention plan in place, and this really changes the narrative, reducing the stigma, and supporting those in crisis. And I'd like to formally acknowledge the work of VetLife in providing essential training on how to implement these prevention plans and helping vets in need with their 24/7 counselling service. Similarly, the Scottish SPCA, a great organisation which does not receive government funding and have had to therefore refocus their activities due to financial pressures. While vets have always had a role in providing emergency first aid care to wildlife, as a result of this, they are now dealing with a marked increase. And along with that, an increase in the number of stray cats brought into vets for free care has risen as well.

And so, on that front, we're supporting the campaign for compulsory microchipping of cats in Scotland. Higher education institutions are under severe financial pressure, and this affects us really acutely, as the veterinary degree is the most expensive degree to deliver in the UK. It costs more to train vets than doctors or dentists, and the funding gap is growing year on year. So there's no NHS for pets, and there's no NHS in which to train vets either. And this relates to critical shortages of vets, particularly in parts of rural Scotland, persisting and so, more must be done to support education and also to increase support for rural practices, who deliver essential services to crofters under the Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme. This is because vets on the ground have a critical role in early detection of disease, and along with colleagues in SRUC's post-mortem rooms and they've been working tirelessly to support farmers to secure bluetongue vaccine supplies to protect their stock, particularly looking forward to next year.

The recent BSE case we had demonstrates the continued effectiveness of routine surveillance testing, and the professionalism of veterinary colleagues working in APHE, Food Standards Scotland, and Scottish Government in keeping the food chain safe for human health. Looking forward, we urge the government to ensure that any public service reform is carefully managed to ensure that local authorities in Scotland are properly funded and able to deliver licensing and delivery of animal health, farm animal welfare, dog controls, and particularly in rural areas, and also to ensure that the veterinary voice is heard in whole farm planning as part of the rural support plan.

A key driver for us in holding our annual dinner here is to discuss these matters with MSPs across all parties, and we look forward to doing that with you this evening. I'm now going to pass across to Gwen Rees BVA UK president.

BVA President, Gwen Rees

Thank you, Vivienne, for that welcome, and for everything that you're doing as Scottish Branch president. Scottish Branch is such a hugely valuable part of the work that we do at BVA. We are very grateful to you, and thank you, Finlay, both for your words this evening and for hosting us here in Parliament. It's my first time, and it's my debut, so I'm very delighted to be here. It is a real pleasure to welcome you all to BVA's Animal Scottish Dinner, and I'd particularly like to welcome our guest of honour Jim Fairlie, Minister for Agriculture, Marine, and the Islands. Thank you very much for being here as our guest of honour and your continued engagement with the veterinary profession and commitment to animal health and welfare here in Scotland.

As a Welsh person, I always feel very at home coming here to Scotland. There is something reassuringly familiar about the combination of mountains, rain, livestock, and a conviction that decisions made a long way away should probably have involved us a little bit sooner sometimes. So tonight is a chance to celebrate Scotland's veterinary profession, its expertise, its contribution to communities, and the extraordinary range of things that vets do for society.

And I think that matters particularly at the moment because this is really quite an extraordinary time to be a vet. We are dealing with exotic and emerging disease threats, major changes to veterinary regulation, and the implementation of the CMA reforms. We've also experienced an unprecedented degree of public and media scrutiny recently. Even the Archers got involved, for any of you who partake. Once the nation is discussing veterinary pricing in Ambridge, we can safely say that veterinary medicine has entered the mainstream national conversation. So these pressures don't affect every part of the profession in the same way, but one way or another, most of us have felt some of them within the profession. That's why BVA has been working very hard to

remind politicians, the public, and the media of the breadth of what it is that the profession actually does.

Vets safeguard animal welfare. We help keep food safe. We protect public health. We support farming businesses and rural communities and when disease threatens, we are part of the national infrastructure that identifies it, controls it, and helps societies recover. That last point is actually particularly important to me. My presidential theme this year is a profession prepared and united behind disease resilience. Scotland has had a very immediate reminder this year of why this matters. We've heard already. Blue Tongue has shown us again how quickly the disease landscape can change, and how difficult it can be to stay ahead of a threat once it is moving. Disease, of course, has very little interest in administrative borders or any borders. It doesn't care whether an animal is in Scotland, England, Wales, or Northern Ireland, and it doesn't really care which government department has responsibility or which professional organisation someone belongs to.

Which means our response can't afford to be fragmented either. For me, preparedness is about much more than having a contingency plan somewhere on a website. It's about people and about relationships. It's about knowing who has the expertise, who has the capacity, how we communicate, how we mobilise, and whether we have built enough trust beforehand to work effectively together when the pressure really is on.

Government has a fundamental role in ensuring national disease infrastructure that is properly resourced and available and able to respond. BVA will continue to press for serious investment in biosecurity and disease preparedness, and we ask for your support in this. But this isn't simply something that we can point at government and ask them to fix. The veterinary profession does have responsibilities too. We've been bringing together our species and specialist divisions to ask what a genuinely prepared profession would look like.

What capability exists across veterinary medicine? What roles need specialist expertise? What skills are transferable, and how could we create meaningful surge capacity in a crisis? That doesn't mean turning a small animal vet into a cattle vet overnight, but it does mean recognising that we are one profession with an extraordinary collective bank of clinical judgement, welfare expertise, communication skills, public health knowledge, and practical problem-solving ability. Our challenge is to work at how to use those properly. Disease resilience. That's not the only issue where we need to come together as a profession. The Veterinary Surgeons Act is now 60 years old. I think even by the standards of Westminster legislation, we can reasonably describe that as due an update. The Act simply does not reflect the profession that we are today. It

doesn't properly recognise a modern veterinary team. It doesn't protect the title of veterinary nurse. It regulates individual vets and nurses without adequately regulating the businesses in which many of them work.

And it does not provide a sensible, modern framework for allied professionals. We now need to turn years of discussion and consultation into legislation, which means securing parliamentary time. The white paper was published over the summer. The bill is being drafted, and we're closer than we have ever been. But we still need a bill slot for this to progress through Parliament. And that's where the political support of people in this room does really matter. Reforming the VSA is not bureaucratic tidying up. It's about protecting animal health and welfare, making proper use of the whole veterinary team, and giving the profession the framework it needs for the decades ahead. And the same is true of the CMA reforms. Practices are beginning to implement substantial changes. BVA's role will be to help ensure these changes work in the real world for veterinary teams, clients, and ultimately for animals. Across all of these issues, I've kept coming back to the same idea, which is that of one profession. We're not a one-homogenous profession.

But we don't all need to think the same way, work in the same places, or have the same expertise. But we do need to pull together. Our diversity is our strength if we can connect it. Government has a part to play too. The best policy comes when government and the profession work together early, sharing expertise, being honest about constraints, challenging each other where necessary, and grounding decisions in what actually happens on farms, in practices, in laboratories, and communities. Scotland has a really strong tradition of exactly that sort of partnership, and I hope we can build on that. Jim Fairlie and colleagues across Scottish politics, thank you for being here tonight and for engaging with us, and to our BVA members and veterinary colleagues across Scotland, thank you again for what you do, often quietly, often under considerable pressure, and usually without anyone outside the profession having the faintest idea just how much responsibility you carry.

We should be proud of this profession, and we should be ambitious for it—a profession that is trusted and valued, that understands its responsibilities to society as well as to individual animals, one that can bring all of its different skills and specialisms together when it matters. If I could ask you all to raise your glasses to the Scottish veterinary profession and to what we can achieve together. Thank you very much.

And it's now my great pleasure to hand over to the Minister for Agriculture, Marine, and the Islands, Jim Fairlie.

Minister for Agriculture, Marine, and the Islands, Jim Fairlie

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you very much, Gwen. You absolutely did make me blush there. That's not something that happens very easily. I think this is the third time that I've spoken at the BVA Scottish dinner.

Thank you very much for your perseverance and your optimism that the speeches will get any better. I'm not entirely convinced they will be, but let's see how it goes.

I can also extend a very warm welcome to all of you to what is your Scottish Parliament. It's a place that's supposed to be for the people and to be accessible. And events like these are integral. It's an integral part of that accessibility. Now we've got quite a few MSPs in here tonight, so please take the opportunity to deliver your messages to them. Tell them if you've got suggestions on how we can do things better in this place, and please feel free to bend ears because I can assure you they will definitely bend mine. But seriously, Vivienne and Gwen, some of the things that you've said this evening, I'm not going to give you answers to those tonight. But please do arrange a meeting with Sheila and come in and let's have a proper chat about some of the issues that you've raised this evening with me.

So we are joined by veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses, students, academics, researchers, industry representatives, and many others who I have an inordinate amount of respect for. It takes an incredible amount of dedication, brains, and straight up hard work to be able to commit yourself to a sector that is so demanding for the vets. But I can only imagine it is incredibly rewarding. I've just come back to Parliament today from Glasgow to see my daughter graduate with her law degree with honours. Obviously, this is a super proud dad moment. We just have to indulge me for a moment. But it got me thinking last night before I headed through about the people that are in this room, because I saw what she had to do to get her degree, and the comparison to that grit and that determination for all of you to be here on so many levels. You're either at the pinnacle of your career, you're starting out, or everything in between.

I absolutely salute everything that you do, what you've achieved, and what you continue to do every day in the work that you do in your businesses. This event allows us to celebrate that and to recognise the enormous contribution that the veterinary profession makes to Scotland each and every day. In my time as a shepherd and a farmer, the relationship I had with all of the vets that I worked with was an absolute essential part of making sure that I was doing the very best that I could in my job. The clinical advice, the knowledge, the expertise. Especially when I was stumped, and the honest conversations when I thought I knew more than I did, and as importantly, or even more importantly, were those times when they became counsellors to me when things were seriously bad. It's been mentioned already just now about blue tongue, the issues

that people have faced, that relationship because I had people like George Greg and Tina Verman, and it was an incredible support to me that is, very often in these farmer-vet relations, that is never recognised, and it's one that I think we should pay more attention to. So even if I am repeating myself, and it does bear repeating, there is so much more to this profession than looking after the welfare of Scotland's animals. You are often pivotal and a bedrock to the mental well-being of the farmers and crofters in really tough times. So I give a very personal thank you for that often unrecognised part of what it is that you do.

But whether you work in companion animal practice, farm, equine, aquaculture, academia, research, public service, or industry, your work matters enormously. A family pet is a member of the family, and I've mentioned the value of farm practice. Public service gives consumer confidence and delivery at the highest standards of welfare for our food sector. Our academics put us at the pinnacle of research and scientific breakthroughs, and that strengthens Scotland's reputation as a global leader in health and welfare for our animals.

And that is something you should all be absolutely proud of, and rightly so. Your role has never been more important than it is today. The link between the health of animals, people, and the environment is increasingly evident. The concept of one health is no longer simply an academic discussion; it is a practical reality. We see in our efforts to tackle antimicrobial resistance to preserve the effectiveness of antibiotics for animals and humans in the future. We see it in our response to the emerging and re-emerging disease threats, and we see it in the growing challenges that climate change presents for animal and human health alike. Veterinary professionals are often among the first to identify the threats, provide the surveillance, and support that coordinated response. Scotland benefits enormously from that expertise, leadership, and vitally, as already has been mentioned, collaboration. We've demonstrated what can be achieved when government, industry and farmers and the veterinary profession work together, with progress made towards the eradication of BVD as a good example. That reflects years of sustained effort and partnership, as supported by veterinary expertise at every stage. That achievement should give us confidence in what can be accomplished through collaboration and the sheer commitment to improving animal health. At the same time, we know there can be no room for complacency, because the continuing changes posed by avian flu, alongside the ever-present threat of exotic diseases such as African swine fever, remind us how important preparedness and vigilance are. Protecting Scotland's animal health status is one of our greatest responsibilities, but it's also one of our greatest strengths. And those strong animal health standards do more than

protect livestock and safeguard welfare. They underpin the confidence in Scottish produce at home and in international markets.

That is one of the reasons why the developments in the UK's relationship with the European Union remain important to the veterinary profession, because progress towards those closer sanitary and phytosanitary cooperation has the potential to reduce friction for the movement of animals and animal products while maintaining the high standards that producers and consumers rightly expect. And the veterinary expertise is central to that ambition. Trust between trading partners is built on robust disease surveillance, effective regulatory systems, and confidence in the professionals who certify and enforce those standards. Our vets play a crucial role in providing that confidence every single day.

As the discussions continue, it is important that the veterinary perspective remains right at the heart of the efforts to facilitate trade, to strengthen biosecurity, and to support the resilience of our food and farming sectors. And the work that is carried out by you, whether it's in practice, whether it's in government laboratories or academia, remains fundamental to those efforts.

And while dealing with all these different aspects, I'm well aware that the profession itself is navigating a serious period of significant change. I know that there are concerns around workforce pressures across Scotland, and many practices face recruitment and retention challenges, as was mentioned earlier by Vivienne. Rural and remote communities are finding it increasingly difficult to secure those veterinary services, and the demands on the veterinary teams continue to grow. So we must also recognise the importance of well-being across the profession. Being a vet must be immensely rewarding, but as I talked about earlier, it must also be incredibly demanding and at times emotionally challenging. So I'm keen to know more about the issues that Vivienne mentioned earlier, and we will pick that up in the meeting that we have shortly. Supporting those already working in the profession while encouraging the next generation to join it is going to be essential if we are going to build a resilient veterinary workforce for the future.

And that future is closely linked to another important issue, that is the ongoing review of the Veterinary Surgeons Act. The current legislation has served the profession, as you said earlier on, for decades. But the profession today is very different from the profession that existed when the act was passed. Veterinary medicine has advanced significantly, and we know that. Vet nurses are playing an increasingly important and highly skilled role in modern clinical teams. The new technologies are changing how services can be delivered, and public expectations continue to evolve. The review of the

act, therefore, is presenting an important opportunity to ensure that the regulatory framework remains fit for a modern and evolving profession. It's an opportunity to support innovation while maintaining public confidence.

And it is a vital opportunity to recognise the valuable contribution of veterinary nurses and the wider veterinary team. It's also an opportunity to ensure that regulation continues to support the highest standards of animal health and welfare. As that work progresses, engagement from the profession is going to be absolutely vital, because your knowledge and your experience that exists within this room and the profession more broadly must help shape the framework that is capable of meeting future needs while maintaining the trust that the public rightly places in your profession. Looking ahead, you are also central to Scotland's ambitions for sustainable agriculture and food production. Whether it's farm animals or aquaculture, our food production systems become ever more technical and complex. So we are asking our farmers to do far more than produce food. We are asking them to do it in a way that works with and protects the natural environment, in a way that ensures the highest of animal welfare standards, and it leaves our environment in a healthier state for future generations.

Healthy animals are generally more productive. They require fewer interventions, and they support a more sustainable farming system. So veterinary advice and science are crucial in helping Scotland to deliver both environmental and economic objectives. Across all the day, there's one theme that emerges again and again, and we've talked about it already, and that's partnership. The challenges we face are far too complex for any one organisation to tackle. Whether we're addressing disease states, supporting workforce sustainability, improving animal welfare, strengthening food security, or modernising professional regulation, the success of all of that depends on collaboration. I'm grateful for the very constructive relationship that exists between the government, the BVA, the veterinary schools, the industry organisations, the animal welfare bodies, and many others. These partnerships are among Scotland's greatest strengths. As I conclude, I want to return to what this evening is really about.

It's recognising a profession that makes an extraordinary contribution to our country, a profession that protects our animal health and welfare, a profession that safeguards our public health, and a profession that supports rural Scotland and strengthens our economy. And it's a profession that is helping shape more and more our sustainable future.

So whether your work takes you to small animal practice in our towns and cities, a livestock farm in the Highlands and Islands, a research lab, a university, a government office or an aquaculture site on Scotland's coastline, your contribution is significant and



it absolutely matters. On behalf of the Scottish Government, thank you for your expertise, for your professionalism, and for your commitment. Scotland is healthier, safer, and stronger because of the work that you do. I hope you have a wonderful evening, and I wish you every success for the future. Thank you.