Ladies and gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here this evening to Cardiff City Hall to the British Veterinary Association annual Welsh dinner.

This is the last annual dinner speech in my year as President and I am delighted to give this final speech here in Wales as for me it’s coming home. As well as being a proud Welshman, my practice straddles the border between Shropshire and Wrexham and I have many clients in Wales, so this is my patch. And of course it’s always good to be back amongst friends and colleagues.

There is always a particular comfort in “coming home” and especially on this visit as we make plans and look towards the future.

**DRIVING CHANGE, SHAPING THE FUTURE: VET FUTURES**

Tomorrow evening BVA and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons will jointly host the Welsh leg of our roadshow for Vet Futures in Swansea.

Vet Futures is one of the most important projects undertaken by either organisation. And perhaps even more important is the fact that we have joined forces to deliver it together.

This project is about us, the veterinary profession, shaping the best possible future for ourselves, for our profession, and keeping animal health and welfare at the heart of what we do.

And it is very much our future that I want to talk about here tonight, reflecting on my theme as BVA President of ‘Driving Change, Shaping the Future’.

I have attended several Vet Futures roadshows across the UK this year and I always come away challenged and inspired by the discussions.

I am eager to hear what my colleagues in Wales will bring to the table tomorrow.

**ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE FRAMEWORK GROUP**

In Wales, the future is in good hands with the Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group, which has been running for about a year now, its methodology soundly underpinned by ‘results based accountability’. We will hear later from the group’s chairman, Peredur Hughes, about the strategic advice the group’s experts have been giving to the Welsh Government on a whole host of animal health and welfare issues for both farm and companion animals. We are very pleased to number among those experts two veterinary surgeons – Professor Jo Price of Bristol Vet School, and BVA regional representative and Swansea practitioner Ifan Lloyd.
It is absolutely right and key to the success of the group that veterinary expertise has a place at the table shaping animal health and welfare for the next ten years. After all animal health and welfare is our raison d’être.

The future of the profession, and of animal health and welfare, must be built upon that expertise and Wales must retain and grow veterinary skills and knowledge within the country.

ABERYSTWYTH VETERINARY SCIENCE CENTRE

In a few weeks’ time, the new Wales Veterinary Science Centre at Aberystwyth will officially open. This is something to celebrate and this hub of veterinary excellence embeds the future of the profession in the here and now. That means we need to get it right from the start, grabbing the potential with both hands and meeting challenges head on.

It took creative thinking by the Welsh Government and the University of Aberystwyth to respond to the loss of laboratory facilities in Aberystwyth with the Veterinary Science Centre. We applaud Professor Will Haresign and local practitioner Phil Thomas for their vision and commitment to this project, which has inspired our Welsh Branch members.

But while celebrating the creativity and innovation behind the centre, we also need to be realistic. For the centre to succeed the Welsh Government and the wider industry need to get behind the project and stick with it, which means proper resourcing. We need to ensure that the Aberystwyth centre and the diagnostic facilities in Carmarthen are supported by the development of a dedicated and comprehensive laboratory in Wales to offer the services and provide the network that lies at the heart of disease surveillance.

SURVEILLANCE

As vets we know the importance of surveillance for both animal and human health and we ignore this at our peril. This has become almost a mantra for me in my year as BVA President and I cannot say it enough times. Wales is not the only country in the UK affected by laboratory closures and BVA’s most recent Voice of the Veterinary Profession survey reveals concern amongst our members about the impact of these closures. There is much at stake for the future in ensuring we can effectively identify and control disease breakdowns.

But I would add, that despite the laboratory closure, Wales is being creative and forward-thinking about surveillance issues. One example here is the introduction of gamma testing for bovine TB at Carmarthen, which takes to sixth gear the early identification and control of a disease that has blighted livestock in Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

BOVINE TB

There are many challenges that face the BVA President during the term of office but I can honestly say that bovine TB is one of the most difficult areas I have had to navigate. And it is one of the most difficult areas we have to tackle as vets who care about the health and welfare of both livestock and wildlife.

We all agree the disease must be eradicated but we sometimes differ on how control and eradication can be achieved. The complexity of this issue is reflected in the fact that in all four countries in the UK different approaches have been taken. We applaud the Welsh Government’s commitment to eradicate the disease particularly with the foresight to move to annual testing for every herd since 2008. This ability to disclose disease much earlier has undoubtedly played a large contribution in the success that is being delivered in Wales - a 28% reduction in new TB incidents during 2014 compared with 2009 and a 45% reduction in the number of reactors, in the same period.
But we also note the cross border challenges of different polices. It is an anomaly that cattle from areas in England that test every 4 years are free to move without prior testing into Wales where tests are carried out at least once a year. The risk of these animals coming into Wales with undisclosed TB could be further reduced by pre-movement testing, and we fully support the call for the exemption to be removed.

Bovine TB is a complex issue between and within borders. It is an issue that BVA has debated seriously and openly with our members and their representatives on Council, taking a compassionate, rigorous and evidence-based approach, particularly in relation to the pilot badger culls in England.

BVA remains fully in support of a comprehensive strategy to tackle bovine TB, including the use of targeted, humane badger culling alongside a range of other measures.

If we are going to get on top of this insidious disease it is crucial that we use everything in the toolbox! The Badger Vaccination Project in the intensive action area is now in year 4 of 5 and we, like so many others, await the results with great interest. It’s still too early to draw conclusions, but we must learn from the project as it progresses.

I know from my own experience as a large animal vet working with cattle farmers the importance for the control of bovine TB of farmers having a good and trusting relationship with their vet. I also know that farmers who are faced with a disease breakdown need all the expert support they can get.

**CYMORTH TB**

That is why Cymorth TB was such an important and innovative project in Wales and why the veterinary profession in Wales backed it so vigorously when it was piloted. The provision of additional veterinary support and advice to farms that have suffered a TB breakdown via Cymorth TB saw successes that mattered.

This success should be embraced and built upon, so it is disappointing that the programme is currently in abeyance and we urge the Welsh Government to reinstate and expand the programme as soon as possible, including the training of vets new to the programme.

**OV SERVICES/ FARMER VET RELATIONSHIP**

Cymorth TB worked because it put the strong relationship between local veterinary surgeons and their clients first and foremost. After the farmer themselves, no one will know a herd as well as the local veterinary surgeon and this is critical in dynamic herd health planning and guarding against disease.

This expert and local veterinary knowledge is why BVA has argued for local vets to remain at the heart of the delivery of official veterinarian services such as TB testing. We are heartened that following the tender for these services in Wales, a network of local veterinary surgeons is being maintained in this crucial work. We also acknowledge that it is early days in the new system and that other critical factors – such as the long term financial viability of the new OV system for those local vets – need to be carefully monitored and assessed as things develop and early action taken to address any emerging issues.

**A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR WELSH AGRICULTURE**

As a vet who works with farmers in Wales, I know the importance of agriculture for this country and the BVA and BVA Welsh Branch welcome very much the recent Welsh Government announcement of the Rural Development Plan and the Strategic Framework for Welsh Agriculture. We are eager and willing to feed into and support the development of the strategy – bringing to the table our professional expertise combined
AMR

Vets working in the community, bringing expert knowledge to local situations, are guardians not just of animal health but of human health.

One of the most important safeguarding issues for the future is to ensure that medicines critical for human and animal health, such as antibiotics, remain effective.

In every survey of BVA members, antimicrobial resistance (AMR) ranks amongst their primary concerns. But being concerned is not enough. As vets, we need to be actively involved in educating clients about the risks of inappropriate use of antibiotics and put AMR on everyone’s agenda as a public health issue. In doing this our approach to AMR must be balanced.

We need to resist kneejerk reactions – such as the calls from some quarters to restrict and reduce the ability of the veterinary surgeon to dispense antibiotics. This would have the potential for huge welfare concerns for animals under our care with a very tenuous evidence base. However, the profession and the wider industry has to take responsibility for antibiotic usage and support the work of groups such as the Cattle Health and Welfare Group who are considering how to improve data collection recording ‘on farm’ of sector specific usage of antibiotics.

ONE HEALTH AND WIDER APPLICATION OF VETERINARY EXPERTISE

AMR exemplifies why veterinary surgeons applying their knowledge and expertise at a local level has global implications and why vets’ work is not just about animal health but about ‘One Health’.

Put simply, what we do is not just about animals. It is about wider society and the world around us. Veterinary expertise spreads beyond the pen and the practice to industry and research, to human health and human wellbeing.

If I can give a live example of this, with us right here and now, one of our guests tonight, Colonel Neil Smith of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps is flying straight from this dinner to Sierra Leone to command a medical unit dealing with the aftermath of the Ebola epidemic. We wish Neil well with that venture and hope the dinner tonight puts him in good stead for the flight and the task ahead.

In many ways, that work in Sierra Leone – helping a nation get back on its feet after a devastating epidemic that affected not only health but prosperity and welfare – perfectly sums up something every vet instinctively knows about their day-to-day work. Of course what we do is about animal health. But it is about so much more as well. It’s about emotions and economics, it’s about policies and politics, it’s about wellbeing and welfare. And of course animal welfare is where we start and what we strive to improve day in and day out.

RESPONSIBLE DOG OWNERSHIP

The welfare of companion animals lies in the hands of their owners and as vets we need to lead in educating owners about their responsibilities, guiding and advising the vast majority of owners who love their pets dearly and see them as members of the family. We also need to stand firm and push hard on irresponsible ownership and irresponsible breeding practices.
**Dog breeding regulations**

We warmly welcome the Welsh Government’s introduction of the Animal Welfare (Breeding of Dogs) Regulations. We very much hope that these regulations will raise the standard of breeding establishments in Wales and be a positive step towards a future in which Wales throws off its unenviable reputation for puppy farming. But as we all know, the test of any regulation is not the words on the paper but in the enforcement and effectiveness of the regulations in action.

**Microchipping**

The enforcement of the Welsh Government’s breeding regulations will be greatly helped by the introduction across the UK in Spring 2016 of compulsory microchipping for all dogs. The ability to trace dog ownership will be a key tool in combating the illegal importation of puppies and will ultimately improve the welfare of animals being bred and sold as pets.

There is a job of work to be done before the regulations come into force and in Wales, as elsewhere, our colleagues who work with companion animals, will be raising awareness with clients and stressing the need to not just chip, but to have up-to-date information on the database.

**FLY-GRAZING**

The ability to trace dogs back to their owners is one of the indisputable benefits of microchipping.

The future looks a lot bleaker for abandoned horses. Fly-grazing continues to be a welfare scandal across the UK, the off-loading of unwanted animals on to others’ land being all too easy and until recently little or no sanctions to address this shocking irresponsibility.

The Welsh Government has led the way here with the Control of Horses Act introduced in 2014 now being followed in England by a similar Act that came into force in May. We very much hope that this aids partnership and cooperation at local authority level along the border. Looking to the future, a central equine database will be fundamental in promoting and sustaining the responsible ownership of horses at a national level.

**NON-STUN SLAUGHTER**

From the field to the slaughterhouse, animals deserve the most humane care we can give at every stage of their lives. That is why BVA’s campaign to end non-stun slaughter remains a top priority for us – in BVA’s Voice of the Veterinary Profession Spring 2015 survey, we saw a 50% increase in vets listing welfare at slaughter as one of their top welfare concerns.

We have also had huge public support on this issue, with nearly 120,000 signatures across the UK for our end non-stun slaughter petition on the HM Government website. We want to continue our dialogue with the Welsh Government and will ask again about numbers of animals slaughtered in relation to the communities the meat is intended for. In the short term, we are keen to pursue the introduction of immediate post-cut stunning as well as clearer labelling for consumers, particularly in the light of the recent European Commission report. At the same time, we will continue our dialogue with relevant religious communities, exploring if new technologies could make stunned meat and fish more acceptable to those communities who require it.

Working in Wales I know how rightly proud Welsh farmers are of Welsh meat as a highly regarded quality product. As we talk again to the Welsh Government about this welfare issue, I would remind everyone that
welfare of the animals is part and parcel of that prized brand and that includes welfare at slaughter. This is worth bearing in mind when considering the creep of non-stun slaughter into Wales.

**BVA’s ANIMAL WELFARE STRATEGY**

As I mentioned at the start of my speech this is my last annual dinner speech as BVA President and I am glad to end this speech talking about welfare and particularly welfare at slaughter, an issue very close to my heart. But of course the future of animal welfare is something that reaches far beyond the concerns of the current President.

I am very happy to say that the future of animal welfare is in good hands with our Junior Vice President, Sean Wensley, who is currently leading on the drafting of BVA’s new Animal Welfare Strategy, something which Sean will drive forward in the coming year.

**THANKS**

Wales is a beacon for animal welfare in many ways and there are some people it is right to pay tribute to here.

Rob Davies, BVA Welsh Branch President for the last two years, has been a tireless and principled campaigner in his promotion of animal welfare on a number of fronts and we thank him for this. I am delighted to welcome Neil Paton as the our new Welsh Branch President and know that Rob is passing the baton to very safe hands indeed.

One person who has been instrumental in securing many of the successes for animal health and welfare and for the veterinary profession in Wales is our CVO, Professor Christianne Glossop. Anyone who knows Christianne will know that she is the most critical of friends and the most formidable of allies. She is someone you want on your side and at your table. We all owe her a great debt for what she has done and indeed I hope will continue to do for many years to come for vets and animal welfare here at home in Wales.

In conclusion, and before I handover to Peredur, I would like my fellow members of BVA to be upstanding and raise your glasses in a toast to ..... “our distinguished guests”.

****TOAST**

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce Peredur Hughes, Chair of the Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group, who will be well known to everyone here tonight.

Diolch yn Fawr.