

**Speech to the BVA annual NI Dinner**  
**Simon Doherty, President of the British Veterinary Association**

**on Wednesday 24 October at Parliament buildings, Stormont**

Thank you, Alan.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for joining us at the British Veterinary Association's annual Northern Ireland dinner. As someone who lives just a few minutes away in Ballygowan, it is a real pleasure to be making my first major speech as BVA President here at Stormont, on my home turf and surrounded by familiar and friendly faces.

I'd like to start by thanking Richard Wright for being our guest speaker today. As the former BBC Northern Ireland Agriculture Correspondent, a BVA Honorary Associate and a long-term friend to the veterinary profession, Richard knows rural affairs inside out, as well as having a deep-seated understanding of Northern Ireland vets, the multiple benefits we realise and the challenges we face. We're delighted to have him here today to impart his wisdom, advice and Brexit-based observations.

From one welcome presence to a notable absence. It would be remiss of me if I didn't say that it's of course disappointing that there is no executive currently in place to engage with vets in Northern Ireland and help to push forward and champion the huge amount of work going on across animal health and welfare priority areas.

All I can say is that this work will continue to gather ground, and the veterinary world is ready to pick up where we left off with key Stormont decision makers when the assembly is brought back into being. We're very grateful to the DAERA Permanent Secretary Denis McMahon for attending this evening along with a number of MLAs, and we will hear from him shortly.

**BVA President's theme**

Drawing on the concept that collaboration is key in the challenging and unpredictable times ahead, my presidential theme this year is 'One Veterinary Community'.

Vets have a crucial part to play in securing good animal health and welfare and veterinary public health outcomes at local, national and global levels. A key focus for me in my presidential year will be championing this activity, especially under the One Health banner.

### **Brexit**

When it comes to thinking about the future, there is an obvious place to start! We are now less than 100 working days from EU exit day and huge questions remain about how Brexit will impact on the veterinary workforce and animal health and welfare in Northern Ireland, and across the UK as a whole.

Since the referendum result, BVA has been working hard to ensure that the veterinary profession has a strong voice in Brexit discussions and that members feel supported to navigate what could be a very different and difficult policy landscape after March 2019. I've given evidence about Northern Ireland at two parliamentary committees in the last six months, and our recent policy briefings have homed in on the particularly complex and unique issues that Brexit may set in motion on this side of the Irish Sea.

### **Brexit – movement of animals and animal products**

For example, a worst-case no deal scenario could pose huge problems in terms of the increased demand on veterinary capacity both north and south of the border. With no agreed 'backstop' in place, we could see a surge in demand for border checks on animals and products of animal origin, in order to comply with World Trade Organisation requirements. We are seeking urgent clarification on what this might mean for the workforce as well as the potential impact on the current straightforward system for transporting companion, competitive and farm animals between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

## **Brexit – agriculture**

We have many of the brightest and best in Northern Ireland agriculture with us here tonight, so I don't think anyone here needs reminding just how important this sector is to the economy, society and our general way of life.

However, there is mounting concern over how Northern Ireland's distinct circumstances will be factored into post-Brexit agricultural policy. A Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report hot off the press has warned of 'drift and delay' in formulating policy and engaging with the sector, at a time when industry needs urgent clarity on changes, challenges and, indeed, opportunities ahead.

From BVA's point of view, we are keen to make sure that the move towards a system of public money for public goods rewards high animal health and welfare standards and incentivises others to follow suit. When I gave evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee back in June, I also emphasised the critical role that vets have to play across all stages of agri-food operations, and I'm pleased to report that they seem to have taken note.

## **Brexit – workforce**

Even before the referendum result, there were shortages in areas of the veterinary workforce in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK, and concerns over recruitment and retention for what is a rewarding and varied but also undeniably challenging vocation. Brexit has certainly exacerbated these concerns, especially for non-UK EU-qualified vets, with recent research from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons suggesting that one in five of them are actively seeking work outside of the UK and nearly half are fearful for their future career.

With the workforce so highly reliant on EU vets, we're also concerned that Brexit will bring restrictions on movement between roles and impose extra bureaucracy and costs on the vital recruitment of skilled workers.

We're very fortunate to have some fantastic EU vets who have come to work in Northern Ireland, and it's incumbent on us all to make sure that status quo is maintained. If you take one thing away with you today, **please support and share our calls for vets to be reinstated on the Shortage Occupation List**. This would give a critical vote of confidence in the veterinary workforce and the multiple benefits it realises, and help to safeguard against a crisis in capacity after Brexit.

It's equally important to make sure that Brexit doesn't hamper the movement of cross-border workers, including a significant number of vets with practices and clients straddling the border. Significant numbers of students train at UCD's fantastic vet school and then come here to practise, and this is where the crucial matter of the mutual recognition of professional qualifications – or MRPQ – comes into play. We have made the case that the UK Government should continue to recognise existing MRPQ legislation through a transitional arrangement to mitigate against a sudden reduction in the veterinary workforce after March 2019. It makes no sense to turn away from this at such a critical point.

### Surveillance

Disease surveillance is one area where it has never been more essential to strengthen and sustain our relationships with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland. Both jurisdictions are committed to curbing the spread of Bovine Tuberculosis and North/South industry-driven programmes have realised major successes in the control of Bovine Viral Diarrhoea – or BVD – and Johne's Disease.

We're particularly fortunate in Northern Ireland to have state-of-the-art facilities spearheading surveillance, conducting animal health and welfare research, and maintaining epizootic disease preparedness. One such example that we welcomed earlier in the year is a new strategic alliance between the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute and Queen's University Belfast, which brings together two world-leading institutions to support innovation and the development of future leaders. I'd like to pass on my best wishes for the success of this partnership, and on a personal note, congratulate new CEO Stanley McDowell on his appointment and wish Sinclair Mayne well for his retirement. [applause]

## Research

From one retirement to another, I would like to extend my warmest regards and best wishes to David Collins, who is retiring from his role at the Department of Health. During his time in post, David has really embraced the profile of ethics in animal health and welfare research. He will be sorely missed, but I have no doubt that Helen Gibney, a former vet school classmate of mine, will be a very worthy successor. [applause]

## AMR

One of the greatest challenges to both animal and human health is, of course, the threat of antimicrobial resistance (or AMR). It is critical that medical and veterinary organisations work together to tackle it at both practice and policy level.

Within the veterinary profession, proactive work is taking place to reduce the risk of AMR and protect our antibiotics for future generations, and this has really started to deliver on its aims.

Here in Northern Ireland, the STAMP Project has got off to a positive start with the support of DAERA, AgriSearch and AFBI, bringing together farmers, processors and wider industry to work towards ambitious UK targets for reducing antimicrobial usage in farm animals. It is a great coup to have two members of BVA Northern Ireland Branch – Alan and Aurelie – involved with the STAMP stakeholder forum and ensuring that veterinary expertise and animal welfare considerations are embedded at every stage.

Whenever Northern Ireland gets its teeth into a health issue a huge amount can be achieved thanks to the small but strong networks in place, and the AMR response is a real case in point. It's been very positive to see the Chief Veterinary Officer and Chief Medical Officer working closely together on a joined-up AMR strategy with a

One Health approach at its heart. We look forward to seeing the strategy and the outputs from the STAMP Project in due course.

## **Pet welfare**

One Veterinary Community is at its strongest when we unite to get our voices heard on the key issues from grassroots to the highest levels of government. Many of this year's biggest campaigning wins have hit the heights they have thanks to vets, vet nurses and students spreading the word and engaging on the issues that matter most.

The clearest case of this has been the resounding success of BVA's Breed to Breathe campaign, which is raising awareness of the serious and often life-limiting health problems suffered by flat-faced dogs, cats and rabbits. The campaign is going from strength to strength as it educates the public on choosing health over looks and challenges brands who are using brachycephalic or flat-faced breeds in their advertising, and that's thanks in no small part to vets and members of the public who have really bought into the campaign's aims and want to help to get the word out in any way they can.

## **Responsible pet ownership**

Tied in with this theme of responsible ownership is helping to educate the public about what a big commitment it is to take on a pet, and how to ensure that prospective owners know how to find a happy, healthy pet and keep them that way. We're delighted to be involved with the Puppy Contract – a one-stop guide for buying a healthy puppy from a responsible breeder, and will be adding equal support to the Kitten Checklist in the near future so that cat lovers also have expert advice at their fingertips.

## **Welfare at slaughter**

Welfare at slaughter continues to be a top concern for BVA members, particularly non-stun slaughter.

This year has seen our campaign for a ban on non-stun slaughter as well as clearer labelling continue apace, and this has taken on new dimensions now that we are questioning whether non-stun meat is being exported as part of new trade deals with countries such as Saudi Arabia.

While there is no indication that non-stun slaughter is happening in Northern Ireland, it could still be finding its way into the mainstream food chain and onto supermarket shelves unlabelled. We are demanding that consumers should be able to make informed choices about the meat they eat, and supply should match legitimate demand to reduce the suffering of millions of animals.

### **Farm assurance scheme**

We understand that there is growing public appetite to be able to make informed choices when buying meat and other animal products, and vets are an integral part of this process. To help support this, we've recently produced an information grid that looks at whether some of the UK's best-known farm assurance schemes address key areas such as veterinary involvement, environmental protection and welfare at slaughter across their production processes.

I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that Northern Ireland is represented on the grid by the Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme, one of the first and longest running quality assurance schemes in the world. Please do help us to spread the #chooseassured campaign message with customers who take an increasing interest in welfare from farm to fork.

### **Support for vets**

Vets in Northern Ireland are doing tremendous things to deliver good animal welfare outcomes, but it's just as important that we look after ourselves too, as well as looking out for others who might be feeling under strain from what can be an immensely rewarding but equally challenging career choice. Just before I finish, I would like to touch briefly on the great work of Vet Support NI, a fantastic service providing peer-to-peer advice and early stage support, accessible by all members of the veterinary family in Northern Ireland. Whatever your career stage, it is so important to take the time and space to focus on your own emotional wellbeing, and Vet Support NI is 'One Veterinary Community' at its best.

### Thank yous

We're delighted that the Chief Veterinary Officer Robert Huey is able to join us tonight, and I'd like to just say that it's been great to work with you and your team this year on issues of interest to the profession, and we look forward to continuing this fruitful collaboration.

Much of the activity and engagement that I've mentioned here could not have been achieved without my incredibly committed BVA Northern Ireland Branch colleagues. I want to say a huge thank you to Alan Gordon; he and the wider branch team have achieved a huge amount and been a driving force for engaging members in policy and ensuring that the branch gives them a strong voice on the issues that matter to them.

To our guests, please do contact Alan, or any BVA colleague, if we can be of assistance on animal health and welfare, or veterinary public health matters moving forwards.

To return to my theme, it will be so important that we all work together in the months ahead to keep the workforce strong and supported and maximise positive outcomes for animal health and welfare, and veterinary public health. If everyone would please rise, and raise your glasses in a toast to "One Veterinary Community". [Toast]



I'd now like to hand you over to DAERA Permanent Secretary Denis McMahon.  
Thank you.