My Lord, ladies and gentleman, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the British Veterinary Association’s annual Scottish dinner. Thank you for joining us.

We are sincerely grateful to John Scott MSP for hosting us this evening. John has, for many years, been one of BVA’s Honorary Members and we truly value his ongoing support for the profession.

We are also delighted that Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity, Fergus Ewing MSP, is with us this evening. Since we were all together at last year’s dinner, a lot has happened in Scottish and UK politics – with Article 50 triggered, a General Election called, and a second Scottish Independence Referendum expected in 2019.

BVA’s Brexit and the veterinary profession report
With so many unknown outcomes, I am not going to dwell on any one of these events, but I would like to highlight BVA’s ‘Brexit and the veterinary profession’ report, which we recently launched.

After 10 months of extensive consultation, our Brexit report sets out short, medium and long term recommendations across seven far-reaching areas to secure the best possible outcomes for UK animal health and welfare, and public health. If you don’t have a copy of this report in your inboxes, please let us know!

A strong veterinary workforce is vital to maintaining high animal welfare and food safety standards. Not a penny of Scotland’s £2 billion agri-food outputs could be realised without vets; veterinary teams support half of all Scotland’s households, which own pets; and vets are an integral part of the international scientific community, annually bringing in over £50 million for research and development projects – much of which is being put to good use in Scotland’s world-leading veterinary schools and research institutes.
Yet each year approximately 50% of vets registering to practise in the UK come from the rest of the EU. This is why we are calling on the Government to guarantee working rights for non-British EU vets and vet nurses currently working and studying in the UK at the existing level, and with no time limit, to ensure the need for UK veterinary services can continue to be met. It is BVA’s priority to protect our veterinary family for the good of animal health and welfare.

**BVA President’s theme**

‘The veterinary family’ – wherever they are from, and whatever their specialism - is my focus as BVA President this year. So, a warm welcome to Chief Veterinary Officer Sheila Voas, and her team, who are at the heart of the veterinary family here in Scotland.

BVA, as the national representative body for all vets, plays a key role in drawing together the profession’s diverse experience and expertise to deliver science-led and evidence-based positions and policy recommendations – which we’re keen to continue working with Scottish Government to develop and implement where possible.

**Review of Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act**

We look forward to hearing from the Cabinet Secretary shortly; and when we last met with his colleague, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham MSP, she shared that a review of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act would be taking place in the next four or five years. This must be a priority: ten years on from the Act's roll out, it is imperative to assess whether it has kept pace with societal change and is still effective in protecting the welfare of all Scotland's animals.

**Welfare at slaughter**

Animal welfare means welfare throughout an animal’s entire lifetime, from farm to fork. While there is only a small amount of non-stun slaughter in Scotland, we would like the practice ended altogether. Evidence shows that slaughter without pre-stunning compromises an animal’s welfare. While non-stun slaughter is allowed in Scotland, we are proposing pragmatic solutions: like food labelling, to offer consumers informed choices about what they eat; and immediate post-cut stunning, to help minimise the prolonged suffering of non-stunned animals.

We are also calling for legislation that guarantees CCTV in all areas of all slaughterhouses, and ensures vets’ unrestricted access to footage - as an essential tool in fostering a culture of compassion within abattoirs.
Circuses

Scotland is already leading the way on so many animal health and welfare initiatives and, if it sticks to schedule, will be heralded as the first country in the UK to introduce a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. This is an issue that BVA has long campaigned on and, while it may not affect a great number of individual animals, the use of wild animals in this way is emblematic of the way we treat all animals.

Pet welfare – brachycephalic, and other designer breeds

Alongside other veterinary organisations, we have been raising public awareness of the serious health problems associated with brachycephalic dogs and cats, as well as other designer pets, which we’re increasingly seeing celebrities promote on Instagram.

Is anyone here familiar with Taylor Swift’s Scottish Fold Cat ‘Meredith Grey’?! This cat has thousands of fans yet we know that Scottish Fold cats suffer from a genetic mutation that causes them to suffer from an incurable, painful and lifelong arthritic type condition, which is why we’ve been speaking out in the media that they should not be bred from.

This past year, we have also written to a number of media outlets and organisations about the irresponsible promotion of pugs and other flat-faced breeds in their advertising.

Pets must be purchased with owners prioritising animal health and welfare – rather than making an impulse buy based on looks alone. We’d urge you to join us in strongly encouraging your friends and family, and your constituents, to choose healthier dog or cat breeds or crossbreeds instead. Our combined voice can reach more animal owners with the right messages about pet welfare and promote practical guidance, such as using the free online Puppy Contract as a simple one-stop-shop for all you need to know when buying a puppy.

Pet welfare – dogs

When it comes to incremental change having a significant impact on animal welfare, we were extremely disappointed at the proposed controls around dogs’ electronic training collars and the tail docking legislation announced in last week’s package of welfare measures. Without an outright ban on both of these issues, we have grave concerns over how enforceability will work – and the toll they will take on overall dog welfare. The detrimental impact of tail docking specifically, is a case that our Scottish Branch President
Melissa Donald will be making when she presents evidence to the Environment Committee at the end of this month.

**BVA animal welfare strategy**
Vets hold the unique opportunity and responsibility to advocate animals' best interests at individual, community and national levels – as outlined in our strategy, ‘Vets speaking up for animal welfare’. It is essential that policymakers recognise the importance of the veterinary profession and consider how best to utilise our unique skills, knowledge and expertise.

For example, we very much appreciate the opportunity to be a part of the welfare working group - drawn up under the Animal Health and Welfare in the Livestock Industry Strategy.

**Surveillance**
As the strategy notes, the risk of incursion by a notifiable or statutory animal disease is always present. Last year’s Avian Influenza outbreak, which hit a farm near Dunfermline, and many others throughout Great Britain, reinforces the need for a robust surveillance system, underpinned by vets' frontline presence, to protect the health of our livestock. We commend the Scottish Government for the continued resourcing of surveillance services through the Veterinary and Advisory Services Programme.

**Endemic diseases**
Ensuring ongoing clinical surveillance within the food chain is pivotal to the Scottish Government’s application for BSE Negligible Risk status – which we were pleased to support at the end of last year. Building on this momentum, we would like to see the tripartite partnership of Government, vets and farmers continue, progressing the excellent work done so far through the development of control measures for Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR) and Johne’s disease – already identified as priorities in the Animal Health and Welfare in the Livestock Industry Strategy.

A final push to eradicate mange from just two more pig herds would also enable us to put the condition on Scotland’s disease elimination list. A significant and laudable achievement.

**AMR**
Partnership working is pivotal in tackling one of the biggest global threats to human and animal health - antimicrobial resistance (AMR). And it is critical that medical and veterinary organisations work together at individual, community and national levels.

Within the veterinary profession, proactive work is taking place to reduce the risk of AMR and protect our antibiotics for future generations: from producing One Health materials, which has led to our nomination for a 2017 Antibiotic Guardian award, to innovations such as the use of wrasse, so-called “cleaner fish”, as a biological and chemical-free alternative to treating farmed salmon for sea lice.

**Rural veterinary provision, including HIVSS**

Vets are crucial links in the chain of guardianship and gatekeeping that safeguards human and animal health, and protects animal welfare. And that is why we are so concerned about recruitment and retention. It is a major challenge throughout rural Scotland, and the Government’s financial support for the Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme is invaluable in enabling the provision of vital veterinary services in these hard to reach places. There, a small number of vets shoulder an enormous burden, with potential impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, which is why initiatives like the Government-backed ‘National Rural Mental Health Forum’ are also welcomed. Established by Mind Scotland and Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC), the Forum aims to improve mental health provision and awareness in rural areas, primarily through connecting people in their local communities – where vets are often the first point of call for farmers and pet owners.

**'Developing the veterinary landscape in Scotland'**

The challenge of recruiting, retaining and supporting a veterinary workforce in rural areas is one of the key challenges being tackled by the ‘Developing the veterinary landscape in Scotland’ project. This Scottish Government-led project dovetails with Vet Futures, BVA’s joint project with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons that has set out a blueprint for the future of a happy, healthy, fulfilled profession. And I am grateful to all of you for playing your part in helping us towards that future.

**Thank yous**

Much of the activity and engagement that I’ve mentioned here could not have been achieved without my incredibly committed Scottish Branch colleagues, who, under the presidency of Grace Webster for the last two years, have gone from strength to strength. Today Grace passed on the mantel of BVA Scottish Branch President to Melissa Donald. So, please join
me in thanking Grace for her dedication, hard work and can-do attitude, and in wishing BVA Scottish Branch continued success under Melissa [Lead short applause].

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

Before concluding, I would like to mention Alex Johnstone MSP - one of BVA’s longest standing Honorary Associates – who sadly passed away in December last year. Our thoughts continue to be with his family.

If everyone would please rise, and raise your glasses in a toast to “absent friends and the veterinary family” [Toast].

I would now like to invite Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity, Fergus Ewing MSP, to speak.