My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, a warm welcome to the British Veterinary Association’s annual London Dinner.

I’d like to start by saying a huge thank you to David Rutley, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Food and Animal Welfare, for joining us as our Guest of Honour and speaker this evening.

In his short time in the role, and despite taking on the unenviably mammoth task for overseeing EU Exit Readiness in his new Defra portfolio, David has given a lot of his time to engage with us, recognising the value of vets and the issues that matter most to our members. We look forward to hearing from him shortly, and David, I think you can expect to continue to hear from us regularly over the coming months!

One Veterinary Community

My presidential theme this year is ‘One Veterinary Community’. In these three simple words, I wanted to convey the vital and varied roles of vets and vet-led teams in securing good animal health and welfare and 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.

The veterinary profession may be relatively small, but it is also hugely diverse and influential. Vets have high levels of public trust in our insights and expertise, and strong connections with our colleagues, clients and the communities we serve. And, in these uncertain times, it’s more crucial than ever that the veterinary community pulls together to navigate the difficult landscape ahead and continue to provide the best possible standards of care.
When you’re talking about difficult landscapes and uncertain times ahead, there’s a blindingly obvious place to start! However, this event has fallen at a point where it is nigh on impossible to make predictions about whether we are looking at a deal, no deal or something entirely different at the end of March, or possibly after that!

BVA’s focus has always been on understanding and informing our members and stakeholders about the challenges and opportunities that Brexit - in any form - could present to the workforce and animal welfare, and ensuring that vets have a strong voice as post-Brexit policy is negotiated and shaped.

We have really ramped up our activity in this area over the past year via committee appearances, briefing events and reports setting out how Brexit is likely to impact on our members, especially in the event of a no-deal scenario. Most recently, our eight point plan for surviving a no deal Brexit has achieved record clickthrough rates with members, highlighting the scale of worry across the profession about potential impacts on vets, our client base and the communities in which we work.

One positive that I can take from this is that understanding of the integral role vets have to play across multiple spheres within and beyond clinical practice really seems to be cutting through and getting noticed at senior political levels. If you didn’t know about the central role of vets in trade, food safety, public health and research before Brexit, you certainly do now.

Brexit - workforce

Even before the referendum result, there were shortages in areas of the veterinary workforce 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. And over half of vets responding to our own recent Voice of the Veterinary Profession survey have said that recruitment has become harder since the referendum result.

In a no-deal scenario, we could also see demand for some veterinary services spiralling, especially in terms of increased requirements for certification of animals and animal products leaving and entering the UK, and extra health testing for pets travelling to and from the EU.

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. For example, the impact of extending the Immigration Skills Charge to EU workers would be most keenly felt in the UK’s abattoir industry, where 95 per cent of the vets carrying out critical public health work in the supply chain hail from overseas, predominantly the EU.

We’re very fortunate to have many fantastic EU colleagues working in England and throughout the UK, and it’s incumbent on us all to make sure that veterinary capacity is maintained whatever the next few months hold.

Be in no doubt, we are at crisis point now and need to avoid a cliff edge. 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 post-Brexit crisis in capacity.

BVA will continue to work closely with Defra and the RCVS through the Veterinary Capability and Capacity Project, to ensure the development of a flexible, skilled and robust workforce that meets the UK’s needs for both the immediate future and in the longer term.
Veterinary capability and capacity

To address veterinary shortages and boost both recruitment and retention rates, it’s essential that the profession gets its own house in order, too.

We know that some of the brightest and best in the UK and beyond are attracted to a veterinary career. However, our recent research with the University of Exeter took some of this shine off, suggesting that many in the profession are feeling demoralised, stressed or pessimistic about their future career progression.

As a profession, we must join forces to address motivation and retention issues and create a culture where everyone feels fairly rewarded and valued for the work they do. This activity will continue apace as a priority this year, with a key focus on supporting graduates entering the workplace, tackling discrimination and ensuring that vets at all career stages have access to advice and wellbeing support whenever they need it.

Maintaining health and welfare standards

As vets, our raison d’être is promoting animal health and welfare, so it came as no great surprise that our members really got behind our animal sentience campaign in a big way just over a year ago.

Over 1,200 vets, vet nurses and students lent their weight to calls to enshrine animal sentience in law and impose a duty on the state to have due regard for animal welfare when developing and implementing policies. The debate was really propelled into the mainstream and captured the hearts and minds of the profession and wider public on a fundamental principle of animal welfare.

Since this flurry of activity, we’ve repeatedly called for sentience to be enshrined in legislation before the UK leaves the EU. It’s therefore hugely disappointing that this has yet to happen, despite government assurances that they are committed to the legislation and underpinning principles. Parliamentary time may be tighter than ever before, but here was an opportunity to make the UK’s status as a global leader on
animal welfare resoundingly clear. We are in talks with Defra to find a solution, and as the clock ticks down we will continue to keep momentum up and engage our members and stakeholders in this vital campaign.

**Welfare at slaughter**

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

This year our campaign for a ban on non-stun slaughter is gaining new ground, as we work with allies to make a strong case for ending the unnecessary suffering of millions of animals.

We are pushing for clearer labelling to help consumers make informed choices about the meat they eat, and calling for greater transparency in the numbers of animals receiving no stun or not being stunned effectively prior to slaughter.

A stand-out issue for us revolves around supply meeting legitimate demand, and we are calling as a priority for the export of non-stun meat to be prohibited. In our eyes and those of many others, this practice runs completely counter to the current derogation to provide non-stun meat only for the consumption of the communities who request it in the UK.

We understand this is a sensitive area, but BVA's focus on this issue has always been about reducing harm. And, while a total ban may seem like a bold move, the example set by several EU countries – most recently regions of Belgium – has shown that it is possible within domestic law.

The next few weeks will see us joining forces with the RSPCA and others to explore the issue and enlist further public support. A few days ago, we wrote to Michael Gove to ask the Government to retract the exemption that allows slaughter without pre-stunning, and to implement a range of measures in the interim to ensure that there is transparency and clear information for consumers. Please do look out for updates from us and lend your voice to this important work.
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. Only last week, I attended a Chatham House event that brought together representatives from human and animal medicine in a One Health approach to exploring the challenges ahead.

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, achieving milestone reductions.

We believe the scope of the threat posed by AMR requires an ambitious, cross-sector approach to tackle it, and so we fully endorse the collaborative global and One Health commitment undertaken by the government in its new 20 year vision. We also welcome plans to further reduce antimicrobial use across the various animal sectors in the UK, and crucially without jeopardising animal health and welfare.

Bovine TB

This wouldn’t be a BVA speech without touching on TB! It is vital that we continue to take a comprehensive, collaborative and risk-based approach to curbing the spread of this devastating disease.

We were pleased to see the Godfray Review published late last year, and have called on government to ensure that vets continue to be engaged in plans given the vital role we play in understanding and eradicating TB. In 2019, a new TB Working Group at BVA will take forward this work and make the case for veterinary involvement at every stage in partnership with farmers and wider industry.
Companion Animal Welfare

England is a nation of pet lovers, and vets are very clear on the role we have to play in advising and educating the public on how to choose a pet and make sure it stays happy and healthy throughout its lifetime. This year has seen our companion animal welfare campaigning work hit new heights as the do’s and don’ts of responsible ownership and portrayal of pets continue to resonate with mainstream media and specialist audiences.

#Breedtobreathe

You’ll hopefully all be aware of our 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.

One year on from its launch, the campaign is going from strength to strength as we educate the public on choosing health over looks and challenge brands to rethink their use of brachycephalic or flat-faced breeds in their advertising. And that’s thanks in no small part to vets, vet nurses 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. With Valentine’s Day a mere week away, I hope that you will all be following our ‘Hugs, not Pugs’ mantra when choosing a card or cuddly toy!

Responsible pet ownership

Staying on responsible ownership, a key priority for BVA 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 endorse the Puppy Contract – a one-stop guide for buying a healthy puppy from a responsible breeder produced jointly by BVA’s charity the Animal Welfare Foundation and RSPCA. We’ll be adding equal support to the Kitten Checklist in the near future so that cat lovers also have expert advice at their fingertips.
Advertising Guidelines

We know that celebrities, brands and social media can hold a huge amount of influence, which makes it all the more important that they think about how their portrayal of pets may sway prospective owners.

At the end of last year, we asked the advertising industry to take a long hard look at how it portrays pets in all forms of media, with the aim of confining flying pugs and boxers on trampolines to the history books. BVA’s Pets in Advertising guidelines have really captured imaginations, with vets and the wider public confidently calling out brands for ‘Promo no-nos’ and asking them to ensure they choose healthy breeds and portray them in situations where their welfare needs are clearly met.

With endorsement from organisations including the RSPCA, Blue Cross and PDSA, and support from the Advertising Standards Authority, this campaign is a shining example of what can be achieved when One Veterinary Community pulls together and brings others on board to amplify a major animal welfare issue.

Thank yous

We can only make a success of this campaign, and improving animal health and welfare more widely, if vet-led teams work together, be that in clinical practice, public health, government services, academia or research. And we can only achieve the breadth of what we do through your support: so, thank you.

Please do use BVA as an evidence-based source of information and professional advice, by speaking to a BVA colleague in the room this evening or contacting us in future.

Before I hand over to David Rutley, I would just like to finish by thanking my fellow BVA Officers, the incredible team of staff at BVA, our members and all of you here tonight who support and champion One Veterinary Community. It’s going to be a busy and challenging year, but I’m excited by the part that we all have to play in ensuring that animal welfare remains front and centre in the months ahead. Thank you.