Ladies and gentlemen – a warm welcome to the British Veterinary Association’s annual Welsh dinner. Thank you all for supporting us through your presence this evening.

Introduction
We are delighted to have the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs Lesley Griffiths with us, especially since I understand this is one of Lesley’s first public appointments after a nasty arm break a couple of months ago. Cabinet Secretary; we hope you are recovering well, and look forward to hearing from you in a few moments.

Team Vet
First, I would like to welcome you all into the fold of ‘Team Vet’! You will have noticed the badges on your tables. They are part of a campaign that BVA launched earlier this year to highlight the value of the vet-led team, and show support for veterinary colleagues - or for your local vet – whatever their specialism, and wherever they are from. Please do wear your badge with pride, and spread the word with a selfie on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or Linked In using #teamvet

BVA’s Brexit and the veterinary profession report
The outcome of the EU referendum last June had a profound impact on many of our veterinary colleagues. Each year, around 50% of vets registering to practise in the UK come from overseas, with the vast majority of these coming from the rest of the EU. In Wales, one-fifth of the current veterinary workforce is made up of EU-građuated vets. This is why our first call was for the Government to guarantee the 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. And we were pleased to see this in many of the parties’ manifestos in the run up to last week’s General Election.

A couple of months ago, we launched our ‘Brexit and the veterinary profession’ report, which sets out 52 short-, medium- and long-term policy recommendations that span seven far-reaching areas to ensure that we secure the best possible outcomes for 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. In the meat hygiene sector alone, some estimates suggest 95% of veterinary surgeons graduated overseas, with most of these non-UK EU graduates. Official Veterinarians (or OVs) operate independently within slaughterhouses to ensure animal health and welfare and public safety, and it is their independence and unique qualifications that instil consumer confidence. The loss of OVs from slaughterhouses – either through a hard Brexit, or compromise of standards - would increase the risk of food fraud, provide the potential for animal welfare breaches, and remove a level of public health reassurance to consumers at home and overseas that could jeopardise UK trade.

**BVA President’s theme**

It is BVA’s priority to protect our veterinary family for the good of animal health and welfare.

The ‘veterinary family’ is my focus as BVA President this year. So, a warm welcome to Chief Veterinary Officer Christianne Glossop, and her team, who are at the heart of the veterinary family here in Wales.

And we look forward to the development of a new hub of veterinary expertise and excellence in Aberystwyth, which is bringing together the right resources to deliver training opportunities to Wales’s vets of tomorrow.

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. And we’re keen to continue working with the Welsh Government to develop and implement these where possible.

Our presence, influence and engagement in Wales is thanks to the efforts of BVA’s Welsh Branch, who today elected Sarah Carr as their President. The appointment of Sarah sees four female BVA Presidents across the UK – with me, Sarah, and our colleagues in BVA Scottish and Northern Ireland Branches – for the first time ever.

In a profession where women now make up 60% of the workforce, and with an even greater 80-20 female/male split in veterinary students, it’s a unique moment that we should be proud of. One of the actions coming out of the Vet Futures project – a joint BVA and Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons initiative – is focusing on opportunities for women and other groups who are underrepresented in leadership. This is alongside many other Vet Futures initiatives to ensure the profession is prepared for, and shapes its own future.
Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group

We are equally pleased to see the appointment of more women and veterinary surgeons to the Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group, ensuring a better gender and expertise balance to meet the needs of animals in Wales.

BVA animal welfare strategy

It is essential that policymakers recognise the vital role vets play, and maximise the skills, knowledge and expertise of the veterinary resource.

As outlined in our animal welfare strategy, 'Vets speaking up for animal welfare', vets hold the unique opportunity and responsibility to advocate animals' best interests at individual, community and national levels.

Welfare at slaughter

Welfare at slaughter is one of the issues BVA has advocated for many years. While there is only a small amount of non-stun slaughter in Wales, 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 Wales, 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 were disappointed that the Safeguarding Animal Welfare at Slaughter Task and Finish Group’s report concluded that there was not a “sufficient basis” for making CCTV in Welsh abattoirs mandatory. While we know that CCTV is not the answer to all welfare concerns, it encourages the highest standards of animal welfare and good stockmanship – and is an essential tool in fostering a culture of compassion within abattoirs. We would urge the Cabinet Secretary to look at this issue again, and not miss the opportunity to set an example for the rest of the UK to follow.

Wild animals in travelling circuses

From the welfare of millions of animals to that of a few individual animals, whose welfare is emblematic of the way we treat all animals under human care.

Last summer’s independent review of the science on ‘The Welfare of Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses’ provided a cogent argument against the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. While questions have been raised about the scope and methodology of the Harris review; ultimately, it builds on the evidence base that shows the welfare needs of wild animals can never be met in travelling circuses. BVA has long called for a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses, and
we would encourage the Welsh Government to set the legislative wheels in motion on this – as we have seen the Scottish Government do in recent weeks.

Bovine TB

Despite many unknown unknowns in the current political landscape, bovine tuberculosis must continue to be a priority as one of the most serious animal health problems that we face. We will continue to work with the Welsh - and all UK - governments to control and eradicate the disease where it is present.

Partnership between vets, farmers and government is paramount to controlling, and protecting against the disease – and the recent Welsh Government report showing a 35% reduction in new incidence of TB in the Intensive Action Area is testament to the success of this joined-up working.

The multi-control approach used in the Intensive Action Area also demonstrates the importance of utilising a wide range of tools to most effectively tackle the disease. We hope this downward trend of TB cases continues and that more areas will implement similar methods, especially when it comes to cattle controls.

However, we do know that TB statistics can fluctuate, which is why, in light of the suspension of the badger vaccination project, we encourage the Welsh Government to include evidence-based control of badgers as part of the refreshed eradication strategy.

Surveillance

A robust surveillance system is vital for controlling endemic disease, and for detecting new and emerging diseases – as we were starkly reminded by last year’s Avian Influenza outbreak, which hit a small holding near Carmarthenshire as well as many other farms and commercial sites throughout Great Britain.

As we head into Brexit negotiations, reciprocal surveillance data sharing with Europe, and internationally, must be maintained. And the UK must ensure an effective and adequately resourced surveillance system that is underpinned by vets’ frontline presence.

As part of the Great Repeal Bill, we are recommending the adoption of the EU Animal Health Law, which provides the means to streamline the current rules into a more flexible, risk-based and proportionate single law. Whatever agreement the UK reaches with the EU, the essential role the veterinary profession currently fulfills to enable trade in animals and animal products must be recognised and maintained to protect animal health, safeguard animal
welfare and retain consumer confidence at a time when it will be most needed.

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: from working with the sector-wide taskforce setting species-specific targets to reduce antimicrobial usage, to producing One Health materials, which last week saw us as finalists at the 2017 Antibiotic Guardian awards, and the work of individual vets in responsibly treating farm animals and pets in communities across the country.

Pet welfare – brachycephalic breeds

We have also been working with other veterinary organisations to raise public awareness of the serious health problems associated with brachycephalic dogs and cats, as well as other designer pets, which we are increasingly seeing in the media, on merchandise and promoted on Instagram.

At the weekend we heard about a pet owner launching a pug club, hoping to bring together hundreds of owners in the Rhondda. While she acknowledged that there has been “some” bad breeding, she normalised their health problems, simply saying that pugs have had “some bad recent press.”

As part of our campaign, we have written to a number of national brands and organisations about the irresponsible promotion of pugs, bulldogs, and other flat-faced breeds in their communications. We would urge you to join us in strongly encouraging your friends and family, and your constituents, to choose healthier breeds, or crossbreeds instead. Our combined voice can reach more animal owners with the right messages about pet welfare. Pets must be purchased with owners prioritising animal health and welfare – rather than making an impulse buy based on looks alone. So, please help us to promote practical guidance like the free online Puppy Contract, which is a simple one-stop-shop for all you need to know when buying a puppy.

Thank yous

This evening I have already mentioned some of BVA Welsh Branch’s proactivity and productivity in my speech. Under the presidency of Neil Paton the Branch has gone from strength to strength. As Neil passes the baton to Sarah, please join me in thanking Neil for his dedication, enthusiasm and can-do approach, and in wishing BVA Welsh Branch continued success under Sarah.
To our guests, please do contact Sarah, or any BVA colleague, if we can be of assistance on animal health and welfare, or public health matters moving forwards.

Now, if all of my BVA colleagues would join me in being upstanding and raising your glasses in a toast “to our guests.”

*TOAST*

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce Lesley Griffiths, Cabinet Secretary for the Environment and Rural Affairs.

Diolch yn Fawr / thank you.