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

Tuesday 21 May 2019 at the Scottish Parliament

Thank you, Kathleen. Ladies and gentlemen, 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 Mairi Gougeon, the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment, is able to join us this evening. In a short space of time, she has shown herself to be hugely committed to championing and building on animal health and welfare standards in Scotland, and we’re looking forward to hearing from her on what comes next.

BVA Presidents theme

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 has been championing this activity, especially under the One Health banner. I’m delighted to represent the UK profession on the International Organising Committee of the 6th World One Health Congress which will be held here in Edinburgh next June.

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 continues to provide the best possible standards of care.

Brexit

When you’re talking about difficult landscapes and uncertain times ahead, there is a blindingly obvious place to start!

Whatever your position on Brexit, there can be no doubt that whenever it happens – and in whatever form – it will have wide-ranging impacts both on the veterinary community and the many spheres in which we operate.

In Scotland and the UK as a whole, BVA’s focus has always been on understanding and informing our members and stakeholders about the potential challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, and ensuring that vets have a strong voice as post-Brexit policy is negotiated and shaped.
Over the past twelve months, we have really ramped up our activity via committee appearances, briefing events, member surveys and reports setting out likely Brexit impacts. Most recently, our eight-point plan for surviving a no deal Brexit 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.

Scotland’s vets make a huge contribution to the agri-food industry, public health, trade, research and, of course, providing treatment and care for the pets owned by half of all Scottish households. I am incredibly proud to have been appointed by the first Minister as a GlobalScot, last year, and through that to have the opportunity to continue to work with Scottish companies, universities and research institutes to support export trade and inward investment in the animal health and aquaculture space.

Our main area of concern is how we keep workforce supply and resilience high after Brexit, especially given that one in seven vets practising in Scotland is a non-British EU graduate. The loss of even a small percentage of the workforce could have serious repercussions, especially in the abattoir industry, where an estimated 95 per cent of Official Veterinarians carrying out vital work protecting animal welfare and public health hail from overseas, predominantly the EU.

You’ll all hopefully be aware that BVA has been pushing for vets to be restored to the Shortage Occupation List, to help to safeguard against a post-Brexit crisis in capacity. Our understanding is that we should find out soon whether this campaign has hit the right note with the Migration Advisory Committee and Home Office, but while we watch this space for a firm update, please do continue to support us and share this vital call for action.

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.

There is no single silver bullet to addressing these challenges, and it’s incumbent on the profession to ensure that vets feel supported, motivated and valued wherever they work and at all career stages. BVA has launched major new projects this year geared towards supporting graduates entering the workplace, understanding and tackling discrimination and ensuring that all vets have access to advice and wellbeing support whenever they need it.

We are also supporting some excellent projects here in Scotland that are doing fantastic work to understand and act on veterinary recruitment and retention challenges. From a long list of success stories, I’d like to give a special shout out to the Scottish Veterinary Delivery Landscape project for really getting under the surface of key workforce issues, and the Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme, which is doing sterling work to ensure that vital services are available in remote communities. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to visit several HIVSS practices yesterday, north of Inverness, and to learn more about the interactions between the Scottish vets and SRUC and the University of the Highlands & Islands. Thank you to the Scottish Government for your ongoing support for these crucial and impactful projects.

Hot on the heels of Mental Health Awareness Week, I’d also like to pay special tribute to the National Rural Mental Health Forum and Farmwell Scotland. The Forum has made major strides in improving mental health provision and awareness in rural areas, while Farmwell recognises and
taps into vets’ unique position to signpost farmers to appropriate support if they need it.

Poor mental health is a huge issue in our profession and in rural communities. Only by working together and by supporting one another can we hope to tackle it.

**Surveillance**

The news that BSE had been confirmed on a farm in Scotland towards the end of last year was of course a huge matter of concern across the farming and veterinary professions. However, one positive that we can take from this case is how it showed the strength of our robust surveillance systems, as vets and industry sprung quickly into action to identify the risk and put appropriate precautionary measures in place. We’re delighted that Sheila Voas, Scotland’s Chief Veterinary Officer, can join us tonight; you and your team of government vets should be very proud of your rapid but calm and measured response.

Scotland can and should be very proud of its strong and responsive surveillance networks, although these are now going through considerable changes with SRUC’s closure of its Inverness post-mortem facilities and plans to raise funds for a Rural Veterinary Hub. Subject to coverage being maintained, we feel that this will be a positive move that supports innovation and improved engagement between vets and farmers. It’s absolutely paramount that practising vets engage with these new services: use it or lose it. We’ll be watching developments with keen interest.

**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.

Our refreshed position on responsible antimicrobial use in food-producing animals, launched in May, calls on vets to familiarise themselves with reduction targets and work closely with farmers and stock-keepers to achieve them. We’re all in this together and I would urge everyone to follow a One Health approach which avoids any culture of blame. This will be key to preserving these essential medicines for both humans and animals in the future.
Welfare at slaughter

Welfare at slaughter is another issue that continues to be a top concern for our members, and the past year has seen our campaign gain new ground as we’ve worked closely with the RSPCA and made the case for reforms to non-stun slaughter practice in the UK at the highest political levels. In March, we talked through this important and sensitive issue with Michael Gove, and most recently I represented BVA at a special roundtable event convened by the UK Government to give all interested parties a say in next steps.

While we will continue to favour an end to non-stun slaughter, we are also shifting our focus to pragmatic asks where we think there is definite scope for movement. This includes pushing for clearer slaughter method labelling, to give consumers more informed choices about the meat they buy, and calling for an end to the export of non-stun meat from the UK. We’re pleased that the UK government appears to be listening and open to considering what changes can be made.

In the meantime, while we are aware that there is currently no non-stun slaughter in Scotland, consumers can be most confident in the welfare provenance of the animal products they buy if they choose those covered by farm assurance schemes. These do not permit non-stun slaughter and are the best indicator of veterinary involvement, environmental protection and high welfare across the production process.

Sustainability

As vets, we have a crucial role to play in furthering the sustainable agriculture agenda, and it was really encouraging to see that 88 per cent of Scottish vets surveyed recently feel that the profession could be even more active in this. Whether it’s developing technologies to optimise animal health or advocating a ‘less and better’ approach to our animal protein consumption, I firmly believe that this is an area where vets can lead from the front and make a lasting difference for both animal and environmental health.

Livestock worrying

I’ve touched already on what can be achieved when vets and the farming industry join forces to address issues or work towards common goals. A shining example of this has been the joint work to raise awareness of livestock worrying and promote responsible dog ownership in public spaces. Through our Scottish Branch, BVA is proud to support the NFU Scotland Control your Dog on Farmland campaign, encouraging everyone to act responsibly and ensure that Scotland’s vast and beautiful countryside can be enjoyed safely by everyone. We’ve also recently responded to Emma Harper’s consultation on livestock worrying, and await the outputs of this with great interest.

Pet welfare

Speaking of successful campaigns, we were delighted to support the recent Buy a Puppy Safely campaign, spearheaded by the Scottish Government with support from SSPCA and many others.
As vets, we often see at first-hand the tragic consequences of buying from unscrupulous breeders, and nearly a third of Scottish vets told us they have seen puppies in practice in the past year that they fear may have been imported illegally. Empowering prospective owners to understand the consequences of illegal breeding and spot warning signs is really helping to raise awareness of this issue and stamp it out once and for all.

This campaign is a real case in point for how Scotland has led the way this year in championing responsible ownership and enhancing pet welfare standards. If I had to name one area where I feel there is room for improvement, BVA would really like to see the current guidance deterring the use of electronic shock collars strengthened into an outright ban. While we appreciate that the Scottish Government does not condone shock collars, giving this legislation more teeth would be a huge win for welfare and send a clear signal that these cruel and inhumane devices have no place in modern pet care and can do far more harm than good.

Before I hand over to Mairi I would like to record a final note of thanks to all of you who have lent support to our Breed to Breathe campaign, which is raising awareness of the often life-limiting health problems suffered by brachycephalic – or flat-faced – dogs, cats and rabbits. Eighteen months 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. Thank you for your continued support to amplify this important message.

Thank you

Much of the activity and engagement that I’ve mentioned here could not have been achieved without the incredible energy, passion and commitment of my BVA Scottish Branch colleagues.

Melissa Donald, our outgoing branch President, deserves a special mention; she has brought boundless energy to her presidency and settled in seamlessly to the varied demands of the role, from giving evidence on dangerous dogs to taking top billing on Landward talking about vet shortages.

Melissa has also overseen the Scottish branch going from strength to strength, galvanised with a new intake of six new council members with significant and wide-ranging expertise. A huge thank you to her and warm welcome and congratulations to Kathleen Robertson, who has been closely involved with BVA for over a decade and was formally appointed as the branch’s new President earlier today. [Pause for applause]

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

If everyone would please rise, and raise your glasses in a toast to “One Veterinary Community”. [Toast]

I would now like to invite Mairi Gougeon, the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment to speak.