

Speech to the BVA annual Scottish Dinner

John Fishwick, President of the British Veterinary Association

On Tuesday 15 May 2018 at Scottish Parliament

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 Roseanna Cunningham, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, is able to join us briefly this evening. Tonight, we will be reflecting on what the year has held for the Scottish veterinary workforce and the issues that matter to them.

And what a year it has been. Since the last Scottish Dinner back in May 2017, we have seen Scotland making major strides in the field of animal

welfare, often leading the pack when it comes to implementing policies that prioritise keeping animals happy and healthy with a good quality of life.

There have been developments in aquaculture, which have brought new challenges and opportunities in a country where salmon is the largest food export.

And as we get ever closer to March 2019, the uncertainties of Brexit and the impact it will have on the veterinary profession both in Scotland and across the UK looms large. I'll be exploring all of this in my speech tonight.

BVA President's theme

Team Vet, Working Together is my focus as BVA President. Vets across the country are providing crucial services that offer wide-ranging benefits to the public, whether they are advising owners on the best care and treatment for their pets, safeguarding standards in the meat

processing sector, carrying out vital research, supporting farmers to rear healthy livestock or advising governments on animal health and welfare.

Vets are also providing the trusted and expert voice separating fact from fiction when it comes to the increasingly crowded arena of advice on areas such as pet care and how to protect against disease. And it is this unified voice that has helped to secure some major breakthroughs related to animal welfare in Scotland in recent months.

Animal Health and Welfare

Scotland has really led the way on developing policies that keep animal health and welfare front and centre over the past year, and it's been especially heartening when this has also prompted movement and debate on crucial pieces of legislation across the rest of the UK.

MSPs unanimously voted to ban the use of wild animals in circuses late last year following years of campaigning from BVA and others, making Scotland the first country in the UK to do so. We hope that the rest of the UK will follow suit by passing similar progressive legislation and

spelling out how a nation of animal lovers should expect all animals to be treated while under human care.

The rest of the UK also followed Scotland's lead soon after the Scottish Government agreed early in the New Year to take steps to ban the use of electric shock collars and other electronic training devices. Defra launched a consultation on their use two months later. BVA and others have long maintained that shock collars can cause unnecessary suffering, and that using fear as a training tool is less effective than positive training methods. We'll be watching developments with interest and look forward to seeing both Scottish and UK Governments make good on their commitments surrounding this key animal welfare issue.

We're also delighted that animal sentience has been recognised as a priority at devolved level, as demonstrated by MSP and BVA Honorary Associate Mark Ruskell tabling an amendment on this in the EU Withdrawal Continuity Bill. The time is now to ensure that crucial animal sentience legislation beats the Brexit deadline and gets enshrined in law.

Welfare at slaughter

For production animals, animal welfare means welfare throughout an animal's lifetime, from farm to fork. Vets are an integral part of this process, and we understand that there is growing public appetite to be able to make informed choices when buying meat and other animal products. To help support this, we've recently produced a 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 the Quality Meat Scotland scheme is one of the star performers here!

While we understand that there is no non-stun slaughter currently happening in Scotland, our campaign continues apace to see this practice ended altogether. Over the coming months, we are hoping to link up with farmers unions to add momentum to the campaign and work together to find pragmatic solutions to take to Government.

Closely tied in with this is the consultation on compulsory CCTV in all abattoirs in Scotland. This is one area where England is a little way ahead, as this became mandatory at the beginning of May. We believe that the introduction of CCTV is an important additional tool for

safeguarding animal welfare as a complement to the current monitoring carried out by Official Veterinarians to ensure high standards at every stage of the slaughter process.

The issue of the live export of animals is one that carries a requirement to strike the right balance between safeguarding animal welfare and ensuring a thriving food production industry for Scotland. BVA has always maintained that animals should be slaughtered as close to the point of production as possible, and wherever possible transported on the hook rather than the hoof. However, we are clear on the need to pay due regard to geographical complexities, such as exploring how livestock can most humanely be transported from the Highlands and Islands and other remote areas of the country.

HIVSS

Scotland's geography also has a special bearing when it comes to workforce planning and looking at the recruitment and retention of vets in remote communities. This 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 responsibility, with potential impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, which is why initiatives like the Government-backed 'National Rural Mental Health Forum' are particularly welcome. Established by Mind Scotland and Scotland's Rural College, and counting BVA Scottish Branch as a member, the Forum aims to improve mental health provision and awareness in rural areas – where stress and isolation can often be major issues.

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 initiative is running a series of projects which offer support to recent veterinary graduates, promote collaboration and explore how best to communicate the full value of the vet.

It 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. Actions that we are currently taking forward include developing a careers hub and research with the University of Exeter into the motivations and expectations of veterinary surgeons.

Both projects have much to do, but it is incumbent on the veterinary profession to tackle issues together and ensure that the workforce is resilient and well-supported now and going into the future.

Brexit

One can't talk about the future of the workforce without addressing the very sizeable challenges and opportunities presented by next year's withdrawal from the European Union.

There are over 2,200 vets working in Scotland, and of these 14 per cent are non-UK EU graduates. Many of these are playing a crucial role in supporting Scotland's agricultural industry as a cornerstone of the economy. The impact of the loss of even a small percentage of the veterinary workforce could have serious repercussions, especially in slaughterhouses, where it's estimated that 95 per cent of vets delivering

vital public health roles are from overseas, mostly the EU. This is coupled with an estimated 325 per cent rise in demand for veterinary certification if the UK leaves the customs union.

With research from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons suggesting that one in five EU vets is now actively looking for work outside of the UK, and 44 per cent saying they are 'fearful' about what the future holds, it's imperative that action is taken quickly to prevent acute shortages of vets in vital roles post-Brexit. BVA has therefore been urging the Home Office to place vets on the shortage occupation list, to safeguard against a crisis in capacity. Please join us in supporting this vital call.

Aquaculture

If agriculture is the cornerstone of Scotland's economy, aquaculture is a vital building block, with Scottish salmon being the country's largest food export. The Scottish Government has been supporting ambitious plans for further growth, recognising that optimising fish health and welfare is vital to continued success.

Vets are playing a key part in supporting growth and welfare, working closely with other fish health professionals. We were therefore particularly pleased to see the Government establishing a Strategic Framework for Fish Health, with representation from the Fish Veterinary Society, a specialist division of BVA. There have been further positive developments this year in the form of investment in the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre, helping to stimulate innovation and knowledge transfer between academics and industry.

#BreedtoBreathe

Before I invite Roseanna Cunningham to speak, I'd like to end by touching on a BVA campaign where we are delighted to have gained her support and that of the wider Scottish government.

The #BreedtoBreathe campaign stems from the growing welfare concern around the rise in the popularity of brachycephalic – or flat-faced - dogs and cats, such as pugs, French bulldogs and Persian cats. We want to challenge the perception that these breeds' short noses, big eyes and skin-folds are 'cute', when in fact many of these animals will likely suffer

serious and life-limiting health and welfare problems including breathing difficulties, skin problems and eye ulcers.

In creating this campaign, we've drawn widely on the expert views of our members, who raised concerns that only one in ten owners could recognise the breed-related health issues in brachycephalic pets. We want to help people make informed and responsible choices about buying a pet, rather than being swayed by social media, merchandise or celebrities.

The support that this campaign has gained has played a huge part in propelling it up the agenda and helping it to capture imaginations and mass media attention. Thank you to everyone who is pledging support to the campaign and helping to tackle the normalisation of these serious health problems.

#BreedtoBreathe will also hopefully form part of a wider Scottish Government information campaign on responsible breeding and ownership. It's been extremely positive to see Christine Grahame MSP championing responsible dog breeding, buying and ownership, and we'll

be watching the progress on her proposed Member's Bill on these areas with great interest and support.

Thank yous

Much of the activity and engagement that I've mentioned here could not have been achieved without my incredibly committed BVA Scottish Branch colleagues. One year into Melissa Donald's presidency, she and the 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 Melissa, 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 "Team Vet". [Toast]

I would now like to invite Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham MSP, to speak.