Thank you, Ifan. Ladies and gentlemen – I’d like to wish you a very 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 Lesley Griffiths, Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs with us tonight, and look forward to hearing from her in a few moments.

Presidential theme: 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 has been championing this activity, especially under the collaborative, inter-disciplinary One Health banner.

The veterinary workforce in Wales may be relatively small, but it is highly skilled, influential and well-connected. Across the nation, vets are providing crucial and trusted services that offer wide-ranging benefits to both animal and public health and welfare. Tonight, I want to reflect on what the year has held, and on the new challenges and opportunities ahead for Welsh vets and the communities they serve.
When my predecessor, John Fishwick, addressed many of you at our dinner last year, he said that he was impressed by the strength of feeling and scale of work being done to ensure that vets’ voices on Brexit are being heard and harnessed both in Wales and across the UK.

This work is of course needed more than ever in the unpredictable times ahead, but I’m delighted to report that the message has got through on one of our most crucial workforce campaigns.

Last month, we heard that the Migration Advisory Committee is recommending that the veterinary profession should be restored to the Shortage Occupation List. This is a very significant vote of confidence in the work that vets do, and will help to safeguard against a crisis in workforce capacity over the coming years.

Many of you will be aware that this has been a longstanding campaigning priority for BVA alongside the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the wider veterinary community, and I’d like to say a huge thank you to all of you who supported us.

We were very ably assisted in getting this crucial call heard by BVA Honorary Member Llyr Gruffydd, who rallied no fewer than 29 Assembly Members to write to Michael Gove asking for vets to be reinstated on the Shortage Occupation List. We’re also very grateful to Lesley Griffiths for lending her support in a separate letter supporting our campaign. The ball is now in the Home Office’s court to accept the committee’s recommendations and we hope to hear some good news on this very soon.

Reinstating vets on the Shortage Occupation List is of course a huge win, but it is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to addressing some of the very real and present challenges facing the Welsh veterinary workforce. Whatever form and timeframes Brexit ends up taking, we will keep working hard to ensure that the veterinary community has a strong voice as post-Brexit policy is negotiated and shaped.
We’ve been engaging closely with the Welsh Government about our concerns that Brexit could place added pressures on sections of the veterinary workforce, particularly in the event of a no deal scenario. One welcome development is the recent pledge to allocate funds from the EU Transition Fund to cover the cost of certification training for over 100 Official Veterinarians and vets in Wales. This is a very positive move that demonstrates how the integral role OVs play in supporting the food industry in Wales is both valued and supported.

Brexit and animal welfare standards

BVA’s overarching approach to Brexit is that we must at least maintain standards of animal health, animal welfare and public health amongst others – and, where possible, the opportunity should be seized to improve these standards. It’s also vital to us that animal health and animal welfare are recognised as public goods in post-Brexit agricultural policy, and rewarded as such.

We fed in to last year’s seminal Brexit and our Land consultation, and highlighted that delivering animal health and welfare as public goods should be at the heart of new agricultural policy. Wales is justifiably proud of its high standards from farm to fork, and with future trade deals on the horizon we must ensure that this reputation and the accompanying consumer confidence in ‘Brand Wales’ both at home and abroad isn’t undermined at any cost.

Farm Assurance

Research shows that there is growing appetite among consumers to know about the provenance, quality and environmental impact of the food that they buy, and BVA is most definitely doing its bit on this front to raise awareness of how animal health and welfare is factored in across the production process.

This year has seen a renewed push on our farm assurance schemes graphic, which helps consumers to understand what the schemes cover and be confident in the welfare status and quality of what they buy in their weekly shop. Schemes like the
Farm Assured Welsh Livestock Beef and Lamb Scheme are the best indicator of veterinary involvement, environmental protection and high welfare from farm to fork.

Welfare at slaughter

This work also feeds through into our campaigning around welfare at slaughter, which is pushing for clear and relevant labelling of products by slaughter method to help customers make informed choices about the meat that they buy and eat.

While our overarching call for an end to non-stun slaughter in the UK remains firmly in place, we have recently shifted towards pragmatic asks where we think there is definite scope for movement, including pushing for a ban on exports of non-stun meat from the UK.

Over the past year, we have 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. We’re pleased that there appears to be some movement on this important animal welfare campaign and appreciate your continued support.

Sustainable animal agriculture

As vets, we have a crucial role to play in furthering the sustainable agriculture agenda, and it was really encouraging to see that 93 per cent of Welsh 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, asking people to choose farm assured and local produce, 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.
Surveillance

Surveillance is the vital work to ensure that threats to public health, trade and wider society from animal diseases are identified and managed.

Wales is really leading the way when it comes to both innovating and investing in work to monitor and protect against diseases which can have devastating impacts. Effective disease prevention and eradication is a key tool for enhancing economic resilience as well as the global image of ‘Brand Wales’ in the unpredictable times ahead.

Recent highlights have included the allocation of £5m for eradicating sheep scab, and we’ll be watching with interest to see how this work pans out once the tender process is complete. Meanwhile, at the Centre of Excellence for Bovine Tuberculosis in Aberystwyth, work is well underway to better understand and safeguard against this devastating disease.

There has also been some excellent progress made through Gwaredu BVD’s three-year programme thanks to excellent collaboration between vets and industry, and I would strongly encourage any farms who haven’t taken part in the programme yet to get involved before it ends in 2020.

We’re very grateful to the Chief Veterinary Officer, Christianne Glossop, for engaging with us on these crucial areas of work, and delighted that she can join us tonight. We look forward to working together on ways to innovate, increase engagement and articulate the high level of veterinary surveillance in Wales at industry level and beyond.

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.
It’s very positive that we have excellent representation from BVA Welsh Branch on the forthcoming AMR delivery group, providing a vital veterinary viewpoint from the offset of this important workstream that will implement the Welsh side of the five-year AMR strategy.

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.

Pet welfare

We're all aware that Wales is a nation of pet lovers, and there’s been a huge amount of work in recent years to cement and build on this status. This has included rapid progress with revising welfare codes of practice for several different species, with codes for cats and dogs completed this year and ones covering rabbits, primates and greyhounds in the offing.

BVA had a lot to feed into the recent consultation on third party puppy sales, but this is only one part of a far wider problem relating to dog breeding and puppy ownership in Wales. These include illegal imports of puppies and street dogs from Eastern Europe, backyard breeders and the phenomenon of ‘click and collect’ puppies who may have poor health status or become abandoned due to poorly planned purchase decisions. We know that the Welsh Government is very alive to these matters, and will make sure we continue to have a voice in exploring solutions in the interests of tackling dog welfare issues and seeing a step change in responsible ownership.

BVA Welsh Branch will continue to support and contribute to this important work both independently and through representing BVA on the increasingly influential Animal Welfare Network Wales. As Sarah, our outgoing Welsh Branch President said, the strength of the network is that any organisation which is actively promoting animal welfare can be part of a joint voice that has direct influence on Government policy priorities.
Speaking of influence, 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 prospective pet owners on choosing health over looks and emphasise the importance of seeking veterinary advice on healthy breeds and crossbreeds. This campaign has particular pertinence in Wales, where we’re unfortunately still seeing large numbers of brachycephalic dog litters with poor health status being produced year to year. Thank you for your continued support to amplify this important message.

Mobile Animal Exhibits and circuses

Before I invite Lesley to speak, I’d like to say thank you for your support for BVA’s work and the veterinary profession across Wales and for your commitment to animal welfare, most recently evidenced by your statement on mobile animal exhibits, which has extended the scope to also cover static ones. If we want Wales to continue to be globally renowned for its compassion and commitment to high animal welfare standards for all species, reviewing the way that animals are treated under the public gaze is paramount. This also follows hot on the heels of a commitment to ban the use of wild animals in travelling circuses, which we see as emblematic of how we should be treating animals in the modern world.

Thank you to Welsh Branch

Much of the activity and engagement that I’ve mentioned here could not have been achieved without my incredibly committed BVA Welsh Branch colleagues.

Sarah Carr, our outgoing Welsh branch President, deserves a special mention; she has brought boundless energy to the role and overseen a step change in member
and stakeholder engagement, from strengthening our Young Vet Networks and running workforce CPD events in North and South Wales to spearheading the branch’s presence at last year’s Royal Welsh Show. We’ll be at the Royal Welsh again this year – please do swing by and say hello at our reception next month.

A huge thank you to Sarah and warm welcome and congratulations to Ifan Lloyd, who was formally appointed as the branch’s new President earlier today. We’re also delighted to bring on board Collin Willson as the branch’s new Junior Vice President. I’m sure many of you here tonight know Ifan and Collin well – they both have a huge amount of experience to bring to help Welsh Branch to continue to be a strong voice for the Welsh veterinary community. Please do join me in welcoming them both. [Pause for applause]

To our guests, please do contact Ifan, 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]

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce Lesley Griffiths, Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs.