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Lord Gardiner's Address to the BVA London Dinner

7 February 2017

Thank you for your warm welcome. My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, I am conscious of the great privilege that it is to speak to you tonight at this BVA London Dinner. I also having studied the guest list come to this dinner in some trepidation, surrounded as I am by the big beasts of your profession and the animal health and welfare world. One only needs to consider some of the key global issues at large to understand just how crucial you, our vets and animal specialists, are to our country.

The recent outbreaks of avian influenza in domestic and wild birds have highlighted the importance of one Defra's key objectives for the United Kingdom – a country 'protected against animal and plant diseases with strong response and recovery capabilities', and one committed to creating a world-leading food and farming industry based on high standards of animal health and welfare.

So, this evening, I would like to impress upon you how highly my Defra Ministerial colleagues and I value the excellent work of the UK veterinary profession.

Government really does rely on you to be our eyes and ears in animal health and welfare matters and, at times, to provide constructive challenge. I welcome this, as we all seek improvements to animal health and welfare.

This relationship and partnership is about to become more important than ever as we enter a period of political change and manage the many opportunities and challenges posed by exiting the European Union.

We welcome the BVA's proactive approach and will involve you closely in our consultation on the forthcoming Food, Farming and Fisheries Green Paper, which will provide an opportunity for us to engage with a wide number of interested parties.

We want to hear what you consider to be the animal health and welfare opportunities afforded by Brexit, such as improved standards, the freedom to find new ways of doing things and the chance to help make farms more productive.

While leaving the EU forms a huge part of the work of Defra, we are, of course, continuing with 'business as usual' across all of our priorities, and I would like to raise three of these in particular.

Firstly, throughout the changes that lie ahead, the Government's commitment to responding rapidly and robustly to the challenge of disease control remains unwavering.

This is something we are being tested on right now with the recent avian flu outbreak.

I have been seeing a great deal of the Chief Veterinary Officer, Nigel Gibbens, and he and I would be as one in acknowledging the outstanding commitment that vets are giving at this time.

This has again shown that we have a coordinated, effective response capability, with vets, of course, on the frontline.

Vets, both within Government and in private practice, are a key part of our armoury and I am very grateful to all of them.

It is also the case that vets in private practice have played a vital role in surveillance. This is an example of the essence of a partnership approach, which I greatly welcome..

Government remains committed to working in partnership with vets, and not just in identifying and responding to exotic disease outbreaks.

Vets play a vital role in managing non-notifiable or non-regulatory diseases, with the potential for real impacts on productivity.

We all want to see a thriving, productive animal sector that can tackle the long-term challenge of food production to feed a growing population, in the context of climate change and the need to protect our environment for future generations.

This brings us to a second challenge- one of international importance that has most recently been discussed at this year's G20 Agricultural Ministers' meeting- antimicrobial resistance.

Today, the threat of AMR poses a serious challenge to both animal and human health and we should be aiming to reduce antibiotic use to essential use only.

Lessening the burden of endemic animal disease is one of the important ways in which we can do this.

Vets are the gatekeepers of antibiotics, and veterinary leadership has certainly played a crucial role in the progress made so far on reducing the need for antibiotic use in animals.

This is evident from across the BVA species groups and the core BVA itself, from its development of prescribing guidance to its awareness-raising campaigns.

Industry, the veterinary profession and Government each have a requirement to treat this matter with the utmost seriousness.

You, as vets, are trusted for your professionalism. It is your leadership that will enable farmers to limit their hitherto all too frequent use of antibiotics.

This is probably one of the greatest issues facing our generation and I am confident that the veterinary profession will rise to this leadership challenge.

I highlight an aspect that you, of all groups of people, would acknowledge- namely the pivotal role that animals fulfil in our lives.

From the companion animals that we keep as pets, to the animals that we raise for our food and for many other sporting roles besides, I acknowledge, as does my department, the contribution that animals make to society.

And, having ridden horses and fallen off a few, I am alive to the exhilaration and sometimes grief that ensues.

The health and wellbeing of animals are often closely tied to our own.

The One Health/One Welfare dialogue reminds us that the way in which a society treats its animals can have a direct impact on its citizens.

Indeed, there are almost as many pets in our country as there are people- an estimated 57 million of them.

With around 40% of us owning a companion animal, it is hardly surprising that they play such an integral part in many of our lives.

Alongside the well-recognised mental health benefits of pet ownership, we have seen the use of therapy animals to relieve human suffering and animal care being used as an innovative vehicle for offender rehabilitation.

Welfare and protection from mistreatment are of paramount importance so I endorse ongoing training, supported by the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation, to raise awareness amongst veterinary professionals about the links between domestic abuse and non-accidental injury to animals.

I think it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the animals for which we are responsible have a good life but also, at the end of that life, that they have what I would describe as a good death.

For this reason, there are robust rules governing the slaughter of animals in our country.

In addition to the directly applicable EU requirements on slaughter, which cover stunning, we also have our own, stricter national regulations.

And whilst we would prefer all animals to be stunned before slaughter, we have, over many years, respected the right of certain communities to eat meat produced in accordance with their religious beliefs.

I would also acknowledge the confidence that the presence of vets in approved slaughterhouses gives in assuring that there is rigorous monitoring of standards and that enforcement action is taken in the event of breaches of animal welfare.

I am well aware of the BVA's view on the issue of CCTV in slaughterhouses and I can assure you that this is a matter that I am keeping under review.

Defra takes its animal welfare responsibility very seriously.

Indeed, Nigel Gibbens has written to at least four CVOs of EU countries to seek remedial action on the illegal importation of dogs and puppies.

This is not only because of the suffering to the animals themselves and the risk to public and animal health, but also the potential cost and distress to unsuspecting British pet owners having unwittingly purchased an illegally imported dog.

As part of our commitment to addressing this issue, Defra continues to implement effective border controls and, as a result of our welcome partnership with Dogs Trust, over 400 non-compliant dogs and puppies were identified, seized and quarantined by Port of Dover staff in 2016.

However there is no single solution to addressing this problem and progress needs coordinated action by transport companies, government and enforcement bodies and, of course, authorities and vets in other EU Member States.

The ability we have to connect with and draw upon expertise from both within and outside the UK is one of our great strengths.

It is clear from the increasing student numbers at established veterinary colleges, as well as new ones such as Nottingham and Surrey, that there is a great demand for entry into your profession.

I know, however, that many of you are concerned about the resolution of questions relating to EU nationals working as vets in the UK as your President emphasise.

The Prime Minister has made clear that she wants to protect the status of EU nationals already living here, and the only circumstances in which that would not be possible is if the rights of British citizens in European Member States were not protected in return.

My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, I should have declared from the outset that my brother is a vet.

So, I am vicariously aware of the highs and lows of your profession.

But, of course, it is surely a most rewarding one.

What could be more satisfying than caring for so many animals that are essential to our own fulfilment?

Vets have a vital leadership role, not just in securing the health and welfare of animals but also in tackling major challenges for society, such as dealing with AMR and environmental change.

I am pleased to see this recognised in the excellent work of the BVA and RCVS on the Vet Futures initiative.

It remains for me to reiterate the great pride I feel in our country's vets for the vital work they do in keeping Britain's animals safe, healthy and, indeed, happy.

The coming year will certainly present us with challenges. I look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you to meet them to keep raising standards and to seize new opportunities and learning on animal health and welfare matters.

This is a cause we all share, but for your profession it is the prime motivator. This dedicated custodianship for our nation's animals is why your profession remains so well regarded and respected.