

BVA President Gudrun Ravetz

Speech at BVA London Dinner

on Tuesday 7 February 2017 at One Great George Street, London

– PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY –

My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the British Veterinary Association's annual London dinner.

You will all be aware, and we appreciate that many votes are taking place in the House of Commons and Lords today. We've had many expressions of support from parliamentary colleagues who are unable to make it, so a particularly grateful thanks to all of you who have managed to join us this evening.

And a warm welcome to Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Lord Gardiner of Kimble, who has also taken time out of his busy schedule to be with us. We look forward to hearing from Lord Gardiner shortly.

Brexit: the value of the veterinary team

The veterinary family – which is my focus as BVA President - is part of the international scientific community, and we are a diverse profession with far-reaching influence and impact in so many areas of political and public life. Vets are involved in everything from the milk on your porridge to pets and public health services. We work in labs and lecture theatres; we ensure food safety and hygiene; we care for the nation's hundreds of millions of animals; and we play an active role in our surveillance network, protecting herds and birds from disease.

And BVA, as the national representative body for vets, plays a key role in drawing together all of that experience and expertise from across the profession to deliver science-led and evidence-based positions and policy recommendations; like those we're currently developing for Brexit.

The UK veterinary profession relies heavily on EU graduates, who have felt the impact of the EU referendum result since day one.

EU veterinary surgeons make a particularly strong contribution to public health-critical roles, such as working in the Government Veterinary Services. In the meat hygiene sector alone, some estimates suggest 95% of veterinary surgeons graduated overseas. That's why our first action after 23 June was to call on UK governments to protect the status of EU veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses currently living and working in the UK.

A healthy veterinary workforce is vital for UK animal and human health. I would encourage all of our parliamentary guests in the room to sign Jim Fitzpatrick's recently tabled Early Day Motion that highlights the veterinary profession's vital role. And everyone can pick up an 'I support team vet' badge, which we're previewing here this evening ahead of our campaign launch tomorrow – pulling together around the veterinary family, and highlighting the value of the vet-led team. Please do spread the word on social media too using #teamvet

Brexit: Workforce

It was encouraging to see some of these key priorities, on which BVA has been lobbying on behalf of the veterinary profession, make it into the Prime Minister's list of negotiating priorities in her first major Brexit speech a few weeks ago - particularly her desire to guarantee the rights of EU colleagues already living, working and studying in the UK, alongside reciprocal rights for UK colleagues working within the EU. But we have said from the outset that our members need certainty and reassurance, and so we urge the Government to make that firm commitment now.

Brexit: Research and development

As an evidence-based, science-led profession, we were pleased to hear the Prime Minister's recognition of the breadth and depth of our academic and scientific communities. She has made clear her intention for the UK to continue to play a leading role in science and innovation. We must have a regulatory and legislative framework in place to ensure the UK remains a globally attractive place for this cutting-edge research and development.

Brexit: maintain standards, seize opportunities

We know vets remain nervous about the changes to come, with many of our members concerned about the threat Brexit poses for UK animal health and welfare.

One of BVA's key principles for forthcoming Brexit negotiations is that existing animal health, welfare, public health, veterinary medicines, workforce and environmental protection standards must at least be maintained at the same level or to a level equivalent to current EU standards. Yet we can also see the opportunities Brexit presents, and BVA is determined

to work with the Government to seize these opportunities, where they exist, to improve standards.

Brexit: animal welfare

In an early meeting with Defra Secretary of State Andrea Leadsom, we were pleased to hear her vision to make the unique selling point of 'UK PLC' high animal welfare and food safety standards. It's a commitment that BVA fully backs through our high level Brexit principles – copies of which are on your tables this evening. To ensure our high standards continue, it is essential that we maintain existing veterinary certification and controls to satisfy our own consumer demand for quality and safety, and to best facilitate our international trade. Official statistics put the value of UK livestock outputs at £13 billion and not a penny of that could be realised without veterinary input.

When it comes to the forthcoming Brexit negotiations, vets working in every area of the profession, from clinical practice to academia and industry, flagged that animal health and welfare regulations should be a 'top five' priority.

Welfare at slaughter

One piece of legislation that Brexit presents us with an opportunity to review is the Welfare at Time of Killing (or WATOK) Regulations for England, which are a case in point about the welfare-mismatch that could occur between domestic standards and those of our trading partners under the new Brexit arrangements. By failing to bring in evidence-based parameters for all waterbath stunning of poultry, England's WATOK legislation has rendered it impossible for Official Veterinarians to protect the welfare of all chickens at slaughter. Science shows us that, without the evidence-based electrical parameters, birds can end up electro-immobilised rather than effectively stunned, and it's impossible for a vet to make a judgement through observation alone.

It has been suggested that if OVs are in doubt about a bird's welfare they could stop the line. And if this were to happen on every occasion of doubt, parts of the UK poultry industry would grind to a halt. The regulations are simply not fit for purpose, and could call into question England's claim as a leader in high animal welfare.

We also know that evidence shows that slaughtering without pre-stunning compromises animal welfare. While the Government's manifesto commitment to protect non-stun slaughter continues to be UK policy, BVA is proposing pragmatic solutions, like food labelling, to ensure consumers can at least make informed choices about what they eat. We are also

calling for immediate post-cut stunning and better matching of supply to demand in order to help minimise the prolonged suffering of non-stunned animals and of the numbers affected.

And we want to see legislation that guarantees CCTV in all areas of all slaughterhouses and ensures vets' unrestricted access to the footage; an essential tool in fostering a culture of compassion that would help safeguard animal welfare.

Brexit: Animal health

Animal welfare and animal health are inextricably linked and disease control was the main concern identified by vets in relation to Brexit.

The key to the continued success of disease control will be ensuring that resources for existing disease control and eradication programmes are protected. That we have an effective and adequately resourced surveillance system for detecting new and emerging diseases. And that we can ensure the maintenance of reciprocal surveillance data sharing with Europe, and internationally.

AMR

This global outlook will also be vital to the success of tackling antimicrobial resistance, AMR. Vets are deeply concerned about AMR: it threatens our ability to treat animals as well as to protect human health. We recognise that targets for reducing antimicrobial usage form part of the solution to address AMR on a global scale, as outlined in Lord O'Neill's report. But targets must be evidence-based and sector appropriate so we are working closely with our specialist divisions to establish species-specific guidance that takes into account the steps already being taken by livestock sectors in the UK and spreads good practice.

Welfare of pets: dogs

Another cross-border issue that has been a key focus for BVA this past year is illegal puppy imports, with one in three companion animal vets telling us that they have seen puppies that they suspect have been smuggled into the UK.

The most common breeds that vets are seeing are those in hot demand, made popular by celebrities and merchandise; flat-faced breeds like French bulldogs and pugs. Dogs that come with a raft of health and welfare problems that we have to challenge as being "normal" for the breed. Suffering is not normal.

Brexit provides an opportunity for dog health and welfare through a tightening up of the non-commercial Pet Travel Scheme (PETS), which could work to reduce the growing trend of illegal imports.

As part of these measures, Brexit may also provide an opportunity to re-introduce tick treatments for dogs entering the UK in order to protect both human and animal health from the increased risk of zoonotic and other sometimes life-threatening diseases from parasites not native to the UK. We are most grateful to BVA Honorary Associate Alistair Carmichael for tabling an Early Day Motion championing our call for the re-introduction of compulsory tick treatments for all dogs and cats travelling into the UK under the PETS Scheme, and we would urge all Members to support this timely EDM.

Vet Futures: veterinary animal welfare coalition

We hope Defra's new legislation, announced last week, around animal establishment licensing in England will encourage prospective owners to stop and think about where they're getting their puppies from to tackle irresponsible breeding both at home and abroad.

BVA, as part of the Vet Futures project - jointly led with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons - has established an animal welfare coalition of veterinary organisations and vet-led charities in a bid to help the public better understand the five welfare needs of their pets. Our combined voice can reach more animal owners with the right messages about pet welfare and promote practical guidance, such as using the Puppy Contract as a simple one-stop-shop for all you need to know when buying a puppy. I'd encourage you all to spread the word that 'you should never buy a puppy without a contract' and direct any potential puppy buying friends, colleagues or constituents to the free online Puppy Contract and Information Pack.

Looking ahead

So, looking ahead. Obviously there is a long way yet to go and BVA's Brexit Working Group - made up of British and EU vets working in all areas of the profession, and based across the UK - will continue to work closely with the RCVS Brexit Taskforce, consult with stakeholders and gather evidence with a full report setting out our detailed policy recommendations to be launched shortly after Article 50 is triggered. So, we will be in touch!

In the meantime, if you would like to know more about the key issues that I've mentioned this evening, please speak to BVA and other veterinary colleagues around the room

And I come back to my theme of the veterinary family. We can only make a success of Brexit if we harness our veterinary resource in clinical practice, public health, government services, academia, research. We are a small profession but our impact is significant. And we can only achieve the breadth of what we do through your support. Thank you.

I'd now like to invite Defra Minister Lord Gardiner to speak.