My Lord, ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to the afternoon session. Now is the moment that I take stock of my Presidential year and share with you what your BVA has achieved this year and what more we have to do.

This time last year I announced that “Driving Change, Shaping the Future” would be the theme for my year as President.

I firmly believe that as a profession we must be active in driving positive change where we can and shaping the best possible future for animal and human health and welfare, as well as for ourselves.

And it has been a year of change and of looking ahead with a new government in Westminster, and some major initiatives within the veterinary profession – the BVA and RCVS-led Vet Futures project, and our own BVA governance review.

With all change comes challenge but that’s what shaping the future is all about. We’ve had rigorous and robust debates to make sure we address those challenges and I’d like to outline a few of those issues to you now.

I am going to start with an animal welfare campaign that I think BVA can be very proud to have led on. One that captured the public imagination and raised the visibility of BVA, and the profession, in the process.
I have been honoured to be part of the Officer team that put the BVA non-stun slaughter campaign on the front page of The Times not once, but twice, and dramatically increased public and political awareness of the issue through the epetition.

We couldn’t have done it without our members engaging in the campaign and I want to thank you all for what you did to make this possible.

For us it has always been a matter of animal welfare, pure and simple, but we operate in the wider social context and recognise the political and religious sensitivities that surround non-stun slaughter.

It is one of the issues where driving change and doing what is right has required real focus and diplomacy, whether in front of a TV camera or in private conversations with some of the religious groups potentially affected.

In all of those conversations, we have taken strength from the overwhelming support we have had for the campaign from our membership.

bovine TB

We are used to difficult questions and debates but sometimes those difficult conversations have to happen not with external parties but within the veterinary profession – between people who all care but who are not always of one mind on a critical issue.

It will be no secret that our position on wildlife control measures as part of the bovine TB eradication strategy delivered some robust and heartfelt exchanges of views this year.

Through our committees and divisional representation at Council, the issue generated a lot of heat but remained focused on the science and evidence as we debated thoroughly our position on whether or not we should continue to support the use of controlled shooting in the pilot badger culls in England.

To restate our position, BVA fully supports the use of targeted, humane badger culling as part of the comprehensive strategy.
But, as controlled shooting did not meet the criteria set for humaneness and effectiveness in the pilots, we have called for the pilots to be completed using the tried and tested method of cage trapping and shooting only.

We have had to navigate through the many strong views on this issue to reach our position and I am proud that throughout the process we have maintained clear, consistent and credible messaging.

Dog breeding

These difficult conversations about big issues are not going away any time soon. But having the debate is essential to drive change and shape the future.

Take the issue of responsible dog ownership and breeding. We heard at the Animal Welfare Foundation Discussion Forum this year about the demand for ‘designer dogs’ in the UK and the influx of illegally imported dogs to meet this demand from Europe being closely linked to organised crime. It was a disturbing presentation and one that provoked much discussion afterwards.

And here is where we might have to bite the bullet and ask the difficult questions. Do we need to look again at what larger breeding establishments in the UK could offer as a solution to this demand? Can we deliver larger-scale home-bred puppy production without compromising animal welfare? And what would good look like in this scenario?

Together with animal welfare charities, we need to look long and hard at the question of supply and demand.

We need to consider whether we can define the standards that would allow larger scale home-based breeding to stem the illegal imports that cause far worse suffering for the puppies and their mothers - and pose unquantifiable risks to animal and human health through the introduction and transmission of rabies, echinococcus multilocularis, and other diseases.
Surveillance

Rabies is a very stark example of where veterinary surgeons are on the frontline of disease prevention and the One Health agenda.

The increasing importance of One Health was never clearer to me than when very early in my Presidential year I found myself on French radio (not talking in French, I hasten to add) explaining the risks of pet dogs transmitting Ebola to humans following the case of Excalibur, the pet dog of the Spanish nurse who contracted the disease.

In our role as guardians against disease in animals, undertaking veterinary surveillance is critical. We have already heard about the painstaking recording and surveillance work carried out by Bryony Jones and her team which was part and parcel of eradicating Rinderpest from Sudan.

Closer to home, day-in-day-out, veterinary surgeons working penside across the country are, in effect, an early warning system for emerging diseases that pose considerable threats to animal health and welfare and the human food chain.

But however good the vets on the ground, surveillance must be underpinned by an effective system of data capture.

We know from BVA’s Voice of the Veterinary Profession survey that there is concern amongst our membership about the closure of laboratories and the impact on the collection of post mortem data.

The Defra Secretary of State has made a great deal of the value of Big Data, but we need to populate the database.

We know from our survey that large animal vets are carrying out more post mortems themselves, so where is that vital data going?

We have consistently argued that there is a real danger in dismantling a known and trusted veterinary surveillance system without a reliable system to take its place.
Being able to join up the dots of disease is crucially important in our globalised world. We don’t necessarily know where the next disease threat will come from, so we need to be able to make the links to detect, identify and control new disease threats, as well as known enemies.

Here in Scotland the future of surveillance remains equally uncertain, with the decision on the closure of the veterinary unit at Inverness currently on hold following significant opposition from local vets and farmers.

We are pleased that Scottish Government is taking another look at the options and any future proposals must be robust and tested for viability.

We do recognise these austere times but governments across the UK must balance the pressure on budgets against the long-term cost of disease outbreak. We do not want to be in the position of saying ‘We told you so’.

**AMR**

Veterinary surveillance encompasses another major One Health issue – antimicrobial resistance.

For both animal and human health, antibiotics remain amongst our most vital medicines and we have to ensure they remain as effective as possible against infections.

I know our members agree with this, as 9 out of 10 of you in our Voice survey rated AMR as an issue of concern.

When our Senior Vice President, Robin Hargreaves, stood here in 2014, he noted that the European Commission had just published its proposal for a new veterinary medicines regulation. This is a massive piece of legislation and there have been some challenges to us as veterinary surgeons in those proposals.

BVA has worked hard through the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe at the European level to stave off the ‘big bad wolf’ of decoupling where our right to prescribe and privilege to dispense could be challenged.
This would have a huge impact on veterinary surgeons’ ability to effectively treat animals under their care. It has no scientific basis, and indeed some models held up in support of decoupling actually show an increase in resistance.

We also face challenges at home and BVA has been called upon to robustly defend the profession against criticisms from politicians and even the Chief Medical Officer who wrongly suggested that AMR in humans is being driven by over-prescription of antibiotics in animals. Again, our defence has been rational and evidence-led.

AMR is too important an issue for silos amongst the clinical professions. We must work together, share knowledge, and challenge each other. I learned a lot and I hope shared a lot when I spoke on AMR at the British Dental Association earlier this year.

The global challenge of AMR calls for veterinary surgeons and our medical colleagues to take responsibility, not just for the immediate situation in the surgery before us but also for our role in supporting the health and wellbeing of wider society.

OV tendering

I don’t wish to overstate that responsibility of vets to society. But I think it is very easy to understate it.

We protect against disease that can have devastating consequences to animal health and welfare and dire economic impact on the agricultural industries.

We support owners in their relationship with pets nurturing the human-animal bond that can aid human wellbeing, sometimes of the most vulnerable members of our society.

In public health, we ensure the food entering the market is of the highest quality for human consumption. We are proud to take on all of these responsibilities.

And alongside responsibility, there has to be a value placed on our work.
We know that all governments in the UK do, in theory, value us, and our expertise. We have great support from the CVOs in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and I would like to thank them for their ongoing support.

But theory is one thing. Money is another. There are pressures on government budgets and our profession is not immune to these pressures.

We were therefore encouraged to secure a better package, working with our Scottish Branch colleagues, for OVs in Scotland.

This is so important in remote and rural areas, where sustainability of the profession needs to meet demand for services to help farmers control and protect against endemic disease.

In other parts of the UK OVs continue to be at the forefront of endemic disease control even as change not driven by us as veterinary surgeons has occurred.

The introduction of the tendering system for OV services in England and Wales this year is one of those changes.

BVA was against the move to tendering from the outset and we have fought hard every step of the way, arguing that any short term cost savings need to be weighed carefully against a dismantling of the UK’s veterinary network.

We are where we are. A change not driven by us but one where we must be proactive in shaping the future with all partners involved in service delivery.

Some BVA members have disengaged from the delivery of OV services and going forward we will be asking members to inform us about how these new ways of delivery are working when it comes to the renewal of OV contracts.
Governance review

And from changes that we are seeing in the way we work in practice, to changes in the way our association works for members and the wider profession, this year we have been looking at how BVA operates, through our governance review.

The review set out with the explicit aims of ensuring BVA is keeping pace with the rapid and significant changes in the veterinary profession, and that we are also operating in line with modern principles of good governance.

Through the work looking at our processes, structures and relationships we are exploring how BVA and the specialist divisions can best work together for the benefit of the whole profession, and we are developing ideas to improve our transparency and ensure we can better engage members in our activities.

The work is ongoing but we have already made great progress and had fantastic input from our divisions, committees and Council and it has been heartening to see such strong engagement and such a willingness to think about new solutions to old problems.

Through the governance review we are making sure we are not just fit for purpose but fit for the future.

It is a future in which the strength and identity of the devolved nations of the UK will continue to grow.

Alongside the governance review we are giving very serious consideration to how we can enhance the work we do in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and how we can ensure our devolved branches continue to go from strength to strength.

The outcome of next year’s national elections will bring new challenges and opportunities and we will do our best to shape the programme of the new governments by setting out our manifesto priorities on animal health and welfare to the major parties, following the success of our General Election manifesto earlier this year.
Member research and Voice survey

Those agendas for our profession, for animal health and welfare and for One Health are not set in a vacuum, but by and for our members.

One highlight of every BVA President’s role is being able to go out and meet fellow vets and BVA members. And it is one of the most important things we do as an Officer team. There is no use sitting in an ivory tower – or behind a green door – in central London and having no sense or feeling for what members are experiencing on the ground. We need to get out there.

Having said that, there are a lot of you to get out and see! And I am delighted to report another year of membership growth, with strong increase in student membership – the future of our profession.

BVA exists only because of its members and for its members, and we need you to tell us what we are doing right and what we could do better.

Our 2015 membership survey is currently in the field and I urge you to take some time to respond. What you told us three years ago in the 2012 survey has truly shaped the association in recent years.

Let me give you one example. You told us that we needed to be more visible on issues that mattered to vets and leading the public discussion on animal welfare issues. We developed the Voice of Veterinary Profession survey to provide statistical ammunition to go out and say to the media ‘this is what vets think’.

It has been an undoubted success, with statistics from the survey generating 500 extra media hits in this year alone.

So I’d like to encourage even more members to get involved, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all of our members who already volunteer their time to be part of the survey panel. You have made a real difference to the voice and visibility of the veterinary profession in the UK.

I look forward to hearing what members have to say in our member research and taking forward new ideas to keep pace with what you need, what you want and the world we are all working in.
We will constantly keep our membership offering under review but we know that there are some things we have done for a long time that are solid and valued and that we need to keep growing. Veterinary Record and In Practice are a case in point and they have thrived under the editorship of Martin Alder, who celebrated a remarkable 25 years as editor this year.

Congratulations again Martin.

Vet Futures

As I draw to a close there is one major initiative that I want to talk about – Vet Futures.

It’s the first time in recent history that BVA and RCVS have come together on such a high level strategic project and I am very proud that we are a part of it.

So what is it about? It’s about looking beyond the here and now and mapping out where we want to be in 10, 20, 30 years’ time.

It’s about taking an in-depth look at the challenges we face today and thinking innovatively about how to address them for a brighter future.

And, most importantly, it’s about engaging the whole of the vet and vet nursing professions and committing to an action plan to ensure real change does occur. Both BVA and RCVS have been clear from the start that this won’t be a hefty strategy document which is just left to gather dust on the shelf.

A particular highlight of the project has been the very positive response we’ve had from members of the professions who have welcomed our two organisations working together.

Robin, Sean and I have been up and down the country with the RCVS officer team taking part in Vet Futures roadshows to hear directly from vets and vet nurses, and I have thoroughly enjoyed working alongside Stuart and Bradley, despite the rather challenging train journey from Cambridge to Exeter!
It’s fair to say that the interests of BVA and RCVS will not always align perfectly but our open, positive and supportive dialogue is important for the future of the veterinary profession.

The strong themes emerging from the Vet Futures project are being developed into a vision for 2030 and a set of clear ambitions and actions that we will launch together at the London Vet Show. And many of the sessions of BVA Congress at this year’s Show are inspired by the debates coming from Vet Futures – education, regulation, animal welfare, and global imperatives to name just a few.

As I’ve mentioned, Vet Futures isn’t just about veterinary surgeons, but about securing a positive future for the veterinary nursing profession too. I am delighted to have been in post as we celebrated the new RCVS Charter recognising the professional contribution of veterinary nurses, and now we must take the next step.

I congratulate the College on leading the campaign to protect the title of ‘veterinary nurse’ and will wear my badge with pride. I urge you all to sign, support and champion the epetition – there’s a long way to go so we all need to reach out to friends, family, and beyond to keep up the momentum.

Veterinary wellbeing

A further Vet Futures theme – and Congress topic – is veterinary wellbeing.

I have already spoken today about how we are valued as vets. Perhaps a good place to start is with how we value ourselves and recognising the pressures of the job and the pressures we place on ourselves.

Someone said to me recently that vets are a supportive bunch. And we are. But with all the goodwill in the world colleagues can still feel isolated and under pressure and they need to know that help and advice is there.

The Veterinary Benevolent Fund has for many years offered such help and advice to veterinary professionals.

The VBF is in the process of rebranding as Vetlife and its helpline will continue to be there for us when we need to talk through the stress of life and work.
The entirely confidential service is run by volunteers who answer every phone call in person, an enhanced service that has been enabled by funding from the RCVS-led Mind Matters Initiative – something that I cannot praise highly enough.

We also know from the Voice of the Veterinary Profession and Vet Futures surveys that recent graduates can have a particularly tough time during the transition from their support network at vet school into the workplace.

And that is why we are re-invigorating and revitalising our Young Vet Network to create a space – online or in person – for vets to come together to provide support to one another.

As the project evolves I’d ask you all to get involved and make a difference.

Because the young vets of today are the future of our profession. They will continue to drive change and shape a future in which we continue to be valued and trusted in society, and in which we are all proud to be vets.

It can be said that it is hard to predict the future, but we can at least prepare for it. And that’s exactly what your BVA is here to do for you.

Thank you.