



Sean Wensley, BVA President inaugural speech; BVA Members' Day & AGM, Edinburgh

24th September 2015

“Vets in the human-animal age”

When I stood here 12 months ago I commented that it seemed a long way from my first BVA presentation 10 years earlier, when I'd been gratefully relaying how I'd spent my BVA travel grant in Uganda. Now, as I take over the Presidency from John Blackwell, I'm prompted to reflect on that Uganda trip once more.

Having spent most of the time working with local people in local communities, introduced to me by John and Margaret Cooper, I visited, towards the end, the comfortable Mweya safari lodge. There was running hot water and tea in china cups, and a sweeping panoramic view across the hippo-filled Kazinga channel and elephant-dotted savannah.

Over the preceding weeks I had met numerous Ugandans who had asked me how they might get to London and expressed a clear aspiration that their country could be like mine. I don't accept the underlying premise that so-called “developing” countries simply follow “developed” countries – it was pointed out at the APHA Veterinary Conference just two days ago, for example, that we could look to developing countries on how better to integrate human and veterinary medicine – but it did make me think for the first time about development. If we were seen to be leading them, who was leading us? Who was at the leading edge, steering the human journey? These were basic teenage thoughts, but I eventually got there at 23!

Similar thoughts, though, remain relevant. When I reach 73, itself a faint hope for many in the developing world, the human population may have recently reached its projected 9 billion peak, on a planet with finite resources, having woven a complex web of challenges along the way – climate change; unprecedented biodiversity loss; antimicrobial resistance; food security, waste and inequality; to name a few. And we are making these impacts in the blink of an evolutionary eye. Anyone who has climbed Jacob's Ladder in Cheddar Gorge will remember ascending up through the towering gorge, past signs denoting evolutionary time – the emergence of bacteria, the emergence of sponges, worms, ferns, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals. And when you reach the top, exhausted, you are told that if you were to lay a sheet of paper on the ground, its thickness, on the same scale, would represent humanity's entire history.

While humans have appeared in a relative flash, our thoughts and feelings apparently did not, and as science looks for evidence of animal sentience – the capacity to feel things and consciously experience feelings – we find increasing examples in the animals all around us. We wield power as a clever species but have also evolved a moral sense, coupled with foresight.

My Presidential theme is "Vets in the human-animal age". We live in the so-called "anthropocene"; a period when human activities are having such impact on the climate and environment that they characterise our geological era. It's the age of the human animal, recognising humbly that we are one animal amongst many; and the age of human-animal relationships, both positive, for example as companions, or challenging such as conflicts with wildlife as we increasingly compete for limited resources. Vets in this age, in a One Health vein, can highlight our commonality with animals, both in terms of shared disease susceptibility and shared capacity to feel. And we can apply our compassion and ethics across all the human-animal interactions that we experience in our daily work – as pets, on farms, in research laboratories, in sport, in the wild and so on. We can advocate for the best interests of animals and for the natural world, as society expects us to.

With that expectation in mind, and prompted by our members, BVA over the last 12 months has been developing an animal welfare strategy, in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders from across the profession and beyond. I take up the Presidency in the 50th anniversary year of the Brambell Report, which triggered the field of animal welfare science – determining how animals perceive the world and what they need and want from their perspectives - and next year will mark 10 years since the passing of the Animal Welfare Act and the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act. We have asked consultees and members what veterinary leadership in animal welfare looks like to them, at the levels of individual vets in clinics and on farms; veterinary practices in communities; and veterinary associations having societal and political influence. The strategy will be published at the end of the year and it will build on the animal welfare activities developed by my predecessors, not least BVA's widely supported ongoing campaign to end non-stun slaughter.

The strategy will recognise that animal welfare competes for attention in a complex world, which is brought in to sharp focus by the challenges surrounding sustainable animal agriculture. Global meat and dairy consumption is set to double by 2050, but associated environmental, animal welfare and human health impacts are now widely recognised. In one narrative, our profession could simply direct our energies towards growing productivity. In another, in line with the One Health concept, we will collaborate with others to find ways of ensuring humane, sustainable agriculture rewards our farming colleagues for producing safe and accessible food that promotes the long-term health and wellbeing of farmers, farmed animals, citizens and the natural environment.

There is a proverb that says “Give a man enough food and he has many problems. Give a man not enough food and he has only one problem.”

A critical element of my theme is that global challenges can be a distant irrelevance for colleagues who are experiencing problems such as poor mental health, perceived low public status or career dissatisfaction. BVA’s priority areas for the coming year, developed through BVA Council, include promoting the value of the profession, improving veterinary wellbeing and providing career support. We want to generate further member interest and engagement with our work. This year we received a record number of applications for our vacant committee positions and we are now further developing our Young Vet Network. We have an excellent relationship with the Association of Veterinary Students and need to make sure we continue to offer the vital support and representation that we know is needed in the years following graduation.

All of the above requires the systems and culture of a well governed organisation and during this last year we have been undertaking a governance review. All three of us as officers will vouch for the roaring engine of staff at head office, several of whom are here today, and for the shared vision and ethos of David Calpin, our chief executive. Through the governance review the engine is being stripped down, fine-tuned and reassembled. We are determining what committees we need to be most effective; we are building strengthened relationships with BVA’s specialist divisions for the good of the whole profession and looking to forge new relationships with medical colleagues; and we are promoting equality and diversity, including giving our full support to the newly formed British Veterinary LGBT group, who’s first meeting I will attend in London, on my first day as President tomorrow.

These many strands of activity also fit perfectly with the Vet Futures project, the consultative joint BVA/RCVS project preparing for and shaping the profession's future, and I'm very pleased to see Bradley Viner, RCVS President, here and look forward to working alongside you in the year ahead, including jointly lobbying for protection of the title "veterinary nurse". Vet Futures has enjoyed fantastic support from students which should be a great source of optimism, and particularly from the Association of Vet Students and their President Helena Diffey. Helena, incidentally, has been intercalating in global health at Imperial College and is an excellent ambassador for the next generation of vets in the human-animal age.

My "youth", if there is such a thing, knew only two horizons – getting in to vet school and getting out of vet school, and those who enabled that are here today. My Mum and Dad who endured animal odours and gave me a lifelong lesson in finding the best in people. You realise later in life that many decisions were taken on your behalf as a child and if future contentment and happiness were the aims then my parents were skilled decision makers, and this is my opportunity to thank you.

My brother Keith and his girlfriend Danielle are both police officers. When I'm at Mansfield Street discussing the intricacies of veterinary policy, Keith's tasing public menaces dressed as Darth Vader in Tesco Metro. Our professional lives can seem quite distant, but there are of course vets caring for the force dogs and horses, and when attending cases of domestic, standard operating procedure requires both of them to enquire about any history of abuse towards animals, in recognition of the known links between non-accidental injury caused to animals and people.

I thank PDSA for the great support they've given me to undertake this three year term of office, and my fiancée Jenny for accommodating my frequent absences. Over the last 12 months, while working in veterinary practice and actively contributing to the Young Vet Network, Jenny has overseen the renovation of our first home, filling it with cheer and warmth before its first lick of paint or radiator. You learn lines like that spending a year with Robin and John!

And to Robin and John. I think the change that John has headed takes a lot of courage. Delivering change presents challenges, but initiating change is brave and John has done it with sensitivity, an open mind and unflappable resolve, and I've learnt a lot from him. Robin has an insatiable interest in the people and topics around him and is reputed for his sage and pragmatic contributions. I realised that your respect for someone can be revealed if they say well done, and when Robin first said well done to me for something during the year, it meant a lot to me.

And I would like to thank John and Margaret Cooper for encouraging me as a student to contribute my thoughts, give a talk, write an article, at a time when I would not have considered that I had anything of interest to say. If it wasn't for their encouragement of a young vet, I would be idly wondering how people come to occupy positions of responsibility and not stepping in to one now.

So we will forge ahead with optimism, thoughtfulness and realism because there is too much at stake for the animals, ecosystems and humans that we care about, not to. We will keep striving to ensure BVA makes the world a better place *for* vets and a better place *because of* vets. Thank you.

My first official duty is to present the Past-President's medal to John Blackwell. It's been great working alongside you John and seeing your huge commitment to your family and your profession.