Speech to the BVA annual NI Dinner
Gudrun Ravetz, President of the British Veterinary Association

on Thursday 24 November 2016 at Parliament buildings, Stormont

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Introduction

Ladies and gentleman; it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the British Veterinary Association’s annual Northern Ireland dinner.

A warm thank you to Patsy McGlone MLA, Deputy Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, for hosting us in these impressive surroundings. As a BVA Honorary Associate, we extend our thanks for your ongoing support for BVA and your commitment to animal health and welfare.

This evening we're also delighted that DAERA Minister, Michelle McIlveen MLA, has been able to take time out of her busy schedule to join us. We look forward to hearing from the Minister in a short while - and we look forward to working with you to continue championing animal health and welfare in Northern Ireland.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to express BVA's thanks to Chief Veterinary Officer for Northern Ireland, Robert Huey; whose expertise and advice continues to facilitate our valued working relationship with the Northern Ireland Executive.

BVA President’s theme

This year my theme and focus as BVA President is The Veterinary Family; your work colleagues are the people you spend most of your time with, eat meals with, and although the veterinary profession is a small part of the scientific community, it is a diverse profession with far-reaching influence and impact in many aspects of political and public life.

Families must often pull together and that’s exactly what we’re seeing here through the Young Vet Network Peer Support Group that, with funding from RCVS’s Mind Matters Initiative, aims to support colleagues facing primarily professional but also personal difficulties.

And pulling together is what BVA and BVA Northern Ireland Branch also do for the profession; offering a strong voice for vets.

The veterinary profession’s manifesto for Northern Ireland

There is only time to mention a few key issues this evening. But if you would like to discuss any of the key policy recommendations set out in 'Our manifesto for Northern Ireland', which we launched in the run up to May's election – then please do speak to your table host over dinner.

Brexit

Shortly after the national elections, many of us were hit by the shock result of the UK's referendum on EU membership. I don't need to tell you that Northern Ireland, in sharing a land border with an EU member state, is unique in the United Kingdom - which is why one of our first actions, at the end of June, was to write to you, Minister, calling for maintenance of the Common Travel Area to facilitate movement for both work and study purposes.

With almost half of veterinary surgeons registering in the UK having qualified from veterinary schools elsewhere in the EU, we also called for the protection of rights for EU vets and vet
nurses currently living and working here. We'd like to express our sincere appreciation to you, Minister, for your reassuring response to our Brexit correspondence...

BVA, through its Brexit working group of vets from various areas within the profession and all parts of the UK, has identified six key areas of interest for the profession that may be affected by Brexit. These include workforce issues - as just mentioned - animal health, animal welfare, food hygiene and safety, veterinary medicines, and research and development. And today we've had a productive meeting considering specific issues that may arise in a Northern Ireland context; such as the importance of cross-border trade.

BVA is staunch in our call that existing standards of animal health and welfare, public health, veterinary medicines, workforce, and environmental protection are at least maintained as part of negotiations on the UK’s exit from the EU.

Animal health – endemic disease

Excellence in animal health is evident in Northern Ireland, through, for example, the continued progress towards full Officially Brucellosis Free (OBF) status over the past year; as well as progress on the compulsory Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD) eradication scheme. Dr David Graham, Deputy CEO of Animal Health Ireland, has been pivotal in this and, earlier this year, he was awarded the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' Fellowship in recognition. Congratulations David!

We hope that these examples of effective industry-government-veterinary working will stand us in good stead as Northern Ireland’s BSE Negligible Risk status application progresses through to the final decision stage at the OIE Health World Assembly of Delegates’ General Assembly next May. Equally, BVA eagerly awaits the Northern Ireland TB Strategic Partnership’s report and recommendations, which we believe is due in a few weeks’ time.

BVA animal welfare strategy

Animal health and animal welfare are intrinsically linked, as we outline in BVA’s Animal welfare strategy, which we launched in February. ‘Vets speaking up for animal welfare’ provides a framework to help the veterinary profession advocate good welfare outcomes for all animals, identifying six priority areas as building blocks for future action.

As we look ahead to post-Brexit, BVA is also calling on governments to ensure that the unique selling point of the “UK plc” should continue to be high animal welfare and food safety standards.

Food hygiene, safety and trade

Improving animal health, welfare and biosecurity is a commitment already made in Northern Ireland’s Going for Growth initiative. At the time of its launch we called for vets - who are on the frontline of caring for animals, and integral to meat hygiene and public health systems – to be at the heart of initiatives, like this, to significantly expand the local food sector.

We’re keen that the role of veterinary surgeons in supporting the agri-food sector is recognised by the Agri-Food Strategy Board, and that links are strengthened with Invest NI to put Northern Ireland agri-food and agri-tech sectors on the global stage.

As we all know, the agri-food industry is a cornerstone of Northern Ireland’s economy, turning over billions of pounds a year and employing tens of thousands of people — including vets. So we’d urge DAERA to resource continuing work with private veterinary practitioners (PVPs) to ensure a robust framework for export certification in support of agri-food industry, as we enter new markets with our agri-food products — again, particularly post Brexit.

In planning for Brexit, BVA was surprised not to see a veterinary presence on DAERA’s Brexit Consultative Committee. We were somewhat reassured by the Minister’s response to
these concerns, which said that she will consult with vets to ensure as complete a picture as possible, however there are some conversations that we think would be better had through a seat at the table alongside other key stakeholders.

**AMR and veterinary medicines**

Cross sector working is crucial in our One Health world, and perhaps one of the best examples of this is in tackling antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Last week we coordinated with the British Medical Association and Veterinary Medicines Directorate, amongst others, to launch a poster for doctors’ and vets’ waiting rooms to help the public understand what responsible use of antibiotics looks like for both them and their animals; which is effectively the same!

The UK veterinary profession is leading the way on this issue and committed to the responsible use of antibiotics. In May we welcomed Lord O’Neill’s final report, which recognised the importance of using a whole range of measures in both human and animal health to tackle AMR globally. Accepting that evidence-based targets to reduce usage in animal agriculture must form part of the solution.

**Research and Development**

Northern Ireland has led the way on research and development (R&D) around veterinary medicines and vaccines, such as work around the porcine circovirus type 2 (PCV2 vaccine) and Salmonid Alphavirus Vaccine (SAV vaccine) at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute.

And the importance of Northern Ireland in the wider world of animal health R&D is demonstrated through its success in bringing the European Association of Animal Production (EAAP) Conference and the Association of Veterinary Consultants (AVC) General Assembly to Belfast this year, as well as hosting the European Association of Fish Pathology (EAFP) Conference in 2017.

In BVA’s principles for negotiating our exit from the EU, we outlined that the UK should seek to maintain access to EU partnership R&D, or similar pan European funding, and develop new opportunities with global partners.

We’re seeing increasing R&D activity in commercial and academic sectors in Northern Ireland, including Professor Chris Elliott’s work at the Institute of Global Food Security at Queen’s University Belfast on dioxins & horsemeat scandal; such activity is, and will be really important to Northern Ireland post-Brexit.

**Responsible pet ownership - dogs**

Northern Ireland has also led the way in its review of the Welfare of Animals Act (2011) and published its action plan from the review recently. When the review of the report launched back in February, we commended DAERA (then DARD) and the Department of Justice for having worked together so quickly to put these recommendations into practice, and for accepting the recommendations before the report’s publication to allow necessary legislative changes to be made as early as possible. With this in mind, we’d ask that the recommendation from the Welfare of Animals Act Review that dog breeding establishments are inspected for how they socialise animals and enhance and enrich their environments is brought forward and written into the regulations as soon as possible.

Our members tell us that dog breeding is one of their most pressing animal health and welfare concerns, and dog health is a key focus for BVA. Hopefully you all saw the headlines that BVA has been making this year, when we highlighted the health and welfare problems that brachycephalic dogs suffer from irresponsible breeding practices and where we urged prospective owners to choose a healthier breed or crossbreed instead.
As part of our work through Vet Futures, we’ve also launched a campaign with other veterinary organisations, including the British Veterinary Nursing Association – who have launched their own VN Futures Action Plan – to improve pet owners’ understanding of their legal responsibilities under the UK’s Animal Welfare Acts.

Thank yous

Speaking to members of the public – be it on farms, in fields or in practices – is at the heart of vets’ daily role. Vets and vet nurses are often the first port of call for advice on animal welfare. And the whole profession champions measures to improve the welfare of all species.

Our congratulations go to one such member of the veterinary family, Northern Ireland vet Graeme Cooke, upon his appointment as UK Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer, which he’ll take up in the New Year.

I have already mentioned some of the work being done to champion animal health and welfare here; which has been undertaken by our colleagues in BVA Northern Ireland Branch this past year, and I would like to congratulate them on having had such a successful year under Seamus O’Kane. Thank you also for hosting us this evening.

Now, if all of my BVA colleagues would join me in being upstanding and raising your glasses in a toast to … “our distinguished guests”.

*TOAST*

I’d now like to invite Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Michelle McIlveen MLA to speak. Thank you.