

## Speech to the BVA annual Scottish Dinner

Robin Hargreaves, President of the British Veterinary Association

Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2014 at Scottish Parliament

~ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~

EMBARGO: 8.30pm, Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2014

My Lord, ladies and gentlemen. It is my great pleasure to welcome you all this evening to the annual BVA Scottish dinner here in Holyrood. I'd like to thank John Scott for his very kind offer to host us in this magnificent building once again and, of course, for his ongoing support for BVA and for the whole veterinary profession.

I hope most of you will be aware that this week we are celebrating Scotland's animals. It's an initiative of the Parliament's Cross Party Group on Animal Welfare and I am delighted that tonight our guest speaker will be the chair of the Group, Christine Grahame, who has an excellent track record supporting better animal welfare for Scotland's animals.

We very much look forward to hearing Christine's thoughts on some of the major animal health and welfare issues that we all take an active interest in.

For most of us here tonight we are celebrating Scotland's animals because they are the focus of our everyday lives. Whether I'm at my practice, at the BVA offices, or at home, animals are an integral part of my day just as they are for every veterinary surgeon.

And so I would also like to use this opportunity to celebrate Scotland's vets who do so much to ensure the health and welfare of our prized livestock and well-loved pets.

I'm personally very pleased to pay tribute to this year's winner of the PetPlan Vet of the Year award – your very own Hector Low of the Old Mill Veterinary Practice on the Isle of Lewis. As a judge on the panel for the award I was truly inspired by Hector's dedication to his clients and his patients – large and small. And he is a reminder to all of us why we do what we do.

His story underlines why I've chosen trust as the theme for my presidential year. The trust that exists between an individual vet and his or her clients, the trust placed in BVA by our members, and the trust placed in our profession as a whole, by policymakers, stakeholders, and the general public.

### **24/7**

Some of you may be aware that our regulator, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, has recently been considering the veterinary obligation to provide round-the-clock emergency cover.

Our willingness to provide 24/7 cover and attend emergencies when appropriate is one of the main reasons that our clients and the general public place their trust in us. And so BVA supports the principle of the obligation, but the expectation must be realistic.

Hearing Hector's story or visiting the Highlands and Islands is enough to *really* bring that point home; it certainly was for me.

As the issue progresses we need to ensure that animal owners understand what they can reasonably expect, and the cost of that provision.

## **Independence**

The future of 24/7 emergency cover goes to the heart of how we are regulated as a profession, and this has been a key theme of our in-house discussions on the future of Scotland after the independence referendum.

As a non-partisan organisation BVA has not taken a position on Scottish independence, but we have tried to provide a forum for informed debate to take place amongst our members and we've asked questions of Scottish Government and the RCVS.

It is clear that there has been a degree of frustration from some members who are looking for clearer answers about the future regulation of our profession in an independent Scotland. As colleagues in Ireland have pointed out, it took over fifty years for an Irish regulatory body to take over the duties of the Royal College but we would expect any transition for Scotland to be a little quicker!

We are a small profession, but one that I hope you will agree is vitally important to Scotland's livestock business and to the health and wellbeing of the nation's pets. So I hope those on both sides of the debate will continue to engage our members on the issues that matter to them before 18 September.

We have questions around the impact

- on veterinary regulation,
- on funding for Scotland's network of world-class research institutes and the potential for duplication,
- on funding for places at Scotland's two excellent veterinary schools,
- and on veterinary surveillance.

## **Surveillance**

Whatever happens it must be recognised that Great Britain is a single epidemiological unit and disease knows no political boundaries.

Since the 2011 Kinnaird report on veterinary surveillance in Scotland, the veterinary profession and livestock industry have been waiting to hear about plans for the future. We've known that across the UK changes to scanning surveillance are being driven in large part by the need to reduce costs but we have stated clearly that any decisions must be based on good surveillance and diagnostic outcomes, and not purely cost savings.

In England and Wales we have raised concerns that AHVLA is in danger of dismantling the current system before a new system has been tried and tested.

Here in Scotland we still await the detail of the changes. Without wishing to sound too pessimistic we know that's where the devil lies.

The proposal to centralise laboratory services must only be carried out if it improves efficiency and maintains or enhances current performance, and the use of commercial labs should be put into the mix as modelling work is carried out.

In recent years the detection of Schmallenberg virus and the identification of bleeding calf syndrome, and in recent months the discovery of psoroptic mange in cattle for the first time in 30 years, have all served as timely and stark reminders that we reduce our surveillance capacity at our peril.

Robust veterinary surveillance is essential if Scotland is to maintain its worldwide reputation for excellence in food.

## **Aquaculture**

Last December my colleagues and I took up an invitation from BVA Scottish Branch President Ronnie Soutar to learn more about Scotland's aquaculture industry. In terms of exports I understand Scotland's salmon industry is second only to Scotch whisky, and of course I am always willing to go on more fact finding visits.

Visits to Stirling Aquaculture Centre and Scottish Sea Farms were an enormous eye opener for me, but they underlined something I've known for a long time – high quality end products require very high standards of husbandry.

I was particularly impressed by the cooperative nature of the companies in finding innovative ways of working together for the good of the industry, for example by allowing areas to lie fallow for periods to enhance disease control.

Please indulge me for a moment as my son, who is studying economics at the University of Edinburgh, has joined us this evening and I don't think he'd forgive me if I didn't mention that this is a perfect example of avoiding the "tragedy of the commons". By working together and not over exploiting resources industry can work for the overall good of Scotland PLC.

We also learned about the development of an innovative use of wrasse as a biological and chemical-free solution to the management of the scourge of sea lice, thus reducing the need for veterinary medicines.

It is a fact that all livestock industries are coming under increased scrutiny over their use of medicines, and particularly their use of antimicrobials and anthelmintics – the overuse and inappropriate use of which can lead to resistance.

## **AMR**

Last November we were shocked and saddened to hear comments by the UK Chief Medical Officer on Radio 4 claiming that salmon may well eat their own bodyweight in antibiotics.

These inaccurate comments were rightly challenged by the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation, and we hope they were taken out of context, but the sad truth remains that we are battling against these sorts of headlines on a regular basis.

Right now we are putting into place our action plan in response to the UK Five Year Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy – a joint initiative by all four governments of the UK and between human and animal health departments.

We are preaching a very proactive message of responsible use and we have agreed with the principle of reporting and recording veterinary antimicrobial usage to demonstrate that we are putting our message into practice.

It is essential that we take these steps because when the new European veterinary medicines regulations come before the European Parliament later this year we anticipate renewed calls from some countries for 'decoupling' in which veterinary practices could no longer dispense veterinary medicines.

It is a move that could seriously undermine the business model of UK veterinary practice and leave animal owners in rural and remote areas with little or no access to prescribed veterinary medicines for no proven benefit.

## **BVD**

Aquaculture is certainly not the only example of Scottish industry pulling together for the overall good. We have been pleased to note the commitment shown to the industry-led eradication scheme for bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD).

When the scheme moved into its third phase in January, BVA strongly welcomed the new control measures. We have championed the approach in other parts of the UK and applaud the industry's commitment to tackling this endemic and crippling disease head on.

## **TB**

This ability to focus attention, effort and resources tackling endemic disease is in part thanks to Scotland's officially TB free status.

Of course we know that the main risk to Scotland's OTF status remains the import of animals from high risk and endemic areas. That is why I can assure you that the veterinary profession south of the border, and across the Irish Sea, is doing all it can to eradicate this devastating disease from the rest of the UK.

The bovine TB eradication strategy for England sets out a staged approach that seeks to develop TB free status in the north of the country, as well as an edge area to act as a buffer between high and low risk areas.

The Independent Expert Panel report on the pilot badger culls has thrown up a number of significant challenges but we remain committed to a comprehensive approach that utilises all of the available tools.

In the meantime, good biosecurity and purchasing decisions are the key to keeping the disease out of Scotland.

In parallel with the aquaculture industry, the recent decision of SSPO to eject a member for importing smolts from Norway without quarantine (against the Code of Good Practice), underlines the idea that honouring the trust that exists within the agricultural community is the only way to secure Scotland's OFT status.

## ***Industry***

Right now Scottish food and drink is going from strength to strength. I am in no doubt that the strong veterinary input into animal health and welfare resulting in quality products, and the great partnership between vets and farmers, have both had a significant hand in this success.

BVA fully supports moves towards the creation of Food Standards Scotland, and we see a clear veterinary role within the new body.

Ensuring that consumers can have confidence in the food they eat is of paramount importance and we agree that a priority for the new body must be improving the labelling of products.

I was heartened to read that over half of Scottish consumers are prepared to pay more for Scottish products because they can be assured of the quality and they trust the Scotch brand.

### **Horse passport**

As we all know, confidence in the foodchain was truly shaken by the horsemeat scandal last year. Governments across the UK and in Europe were quick to respond and measures to clear up the mess of the horse passport system are now well underway.

But recent changes to the draft horse identification regulations may now prove to be unworkable and a backwards step, and our equine colleagues are seeking urgent discussions before it's too late.

The whole incident proved to be a very stark reminder that we must never underestimate the importance that people place on the integrity of their food.

### **Non-stun slaughter**

It is this strength of feeling that has led to national headlines in recent weeks calling for an end to the “secret” use of halal products on menus and in supermarkets.

In the face of this media frenzy we have tried to inject some facts.

BVA has long argued that all animals should be stunned before slaughter. The welfare compromise associated with the legislative derogation for certain religious communities affects millions of individual animals every year.

We understand that very little non-stun slaughter takes place in Scotland – a small amount of non-stun poultry slaughter – but we don't know how much non-stun slaughter produce is on Scottish supermarket shelves or sold in food outlets.

Our concern is not to do with practice of religious beliefs but the practice of throat cutting without first stunning to render the animal unconscious.

And so, our interest is not in the use of halal products per se – 88% of which *will* have been pre-stunned – but with non-stunned products entering the mainstream market unlabelled.

Two weeks ago we launched our petition calling for an end to non-stun slaughter and, at the very least, a debate about ways to reduce the harm caused by non-stun slaughter. We have been overwhelmed with support from consumers who want to improve animal welfare at the time of death.

We know it is a difficult and sensitive political issue but the debate is already shifting towards a very strong call for clearer labelling; a call that politicians cannot afford to ignore.

But to ensure the debate isn't hijacked by those with other agendas, we recommend that products simply be labelled as stunned or non-stunned. As being in line with UK and EU law, or being under the derogation from this legislation.

We hope these are issues that the new Food Standards Scotland will take up as a matter of urgency.

But while no such label exists we are taking the opportunity to inform consumers that QMS, Red Tractor and Freedom Foods all guarantee that animals have been stunned before slaughter.

### **SA issues**

As someone who grew up on a tenanted farm in Yorkshire and saw how much my family cared for our livestock, these issues are all very close to my heart.

But as a veterinary practitioner my career has been predominantly in small animal medicine and so I want to spend a bit of time talking about some of the key issues within the sector.

### **Tail docking**

High on the Scottish Government's agenda at present is the response to the research from Glasgow University into tail injuries in working dogs.

Announcing the findings last month Richard Lochhead said he had not taken a firm stance on whether to make changes to legislation banning the docking of puppies' tails, but that the research provided a sound basis for discussion.

BVA is currently formulating our response to the consultation but we would question the robustness of the study of working dog owners.

We have always stated that we would look again at our position in favour of a complete ban on docking in light of new evidence, but initial comments from our members are that any concessions would be a retrograde step for Scotland, which has hitherto been considered to lead on this welfare issue.

Our experience in England and Wales where exemptions are allowed is that it is almost impossible to prevent the rules being flouted for cosmetic reasons.

### **Microchipping/muzzling**

Another major canine issue dominating at present is microchipping and other suggestions for improving responsible dog ownership, such as muzzling.

We were absolutely delighted when Richard Lochhead announced at last year's BVA dinner that the Government would be consulting on the compulsory microchipping of dogs to bring Scotland into line with the rest of the UK.

BVA has long campaigned for the compulsory microchipping and registration of all dogs.

We have been pleased to see so much political support for the move which would provide a safe, permanent and effective way for any dog to be reunited with its owner – a significant dog welfare measure.

As any vet in practice will tell you, a real highlight of our job is helping to get a lost dog back to its owner.

Microchipping is an essential part of responsible dog ownership for a small cost and great benefit.

We were also pleased to hear the Environment Minister's comments in a recent debate recognising that widespread muzzling is not necessarily a proportionate step. We have expressed serious reservations that compulsory muzzling of dogs would have a hugely detrimental effect on the animal's ability to exhibit normal behaviour.

We agree it would be disproportionate. The vast majority of dogs are well behaved and their owners are responsible.

### **Pet vending**

Part of celebrating Scotland's animals week is about educating people about the health and welfare needs of animals, and encouraging people to make the right decisions.

For pet owners the first step is choosing the right animal and the right source.

Changes to the pet travel rules have made it all too easy for non-commercial travel rules to be abused by people bringing in young puppies for sale, often advertising them online.

We need to work together to educate potential owners about what to look for when buying a puppy. The golden rule is to always see a puppy with its mother.

The puppy contract also provides a useful framework for owners to ask all the right questions of breeders about health and socialisation. And owners should be prepared to be patient to ensure they are getting a healthy, happy puppy. When we're talking about live animals the "I want it now" culture just won't do.

### **Exotics**

At some point we may have to say that some species have such demanding welfare needs that it's no longer acceptable for them to be kept privately in untrained hands.

We're looking at the value of drawing up evidence-based lists of species suitable for pet ownership and will work with stakeholders to get as much buy-in as possible to avoid pushing the problem underground.

There will be some occasions when it may not be possible to be confident that the welfare needs can be met, and this is the principle behind our call for a ban on wild animals in travelling circuses.

### **Toast**

In all of these issues celebrating Scotland's animals means having the utmost respect for them, which I know all our guests here tonight have.

So I'd like to thank you all for coming along to listen to some of our current issues and concerns and for working so closely with the veterinary profession and supporting BVA.

It is customary for the BVA President to lead members in giving a toast to our guests.

And as my fellow BVA members give that toast I'd like to ask that we all remember a couple of dear absent friends – our veterinary colleague Elspeth Scott and Joe Watson of the Press & Journal, both of whom were taken from us far too soon.

To our guests, friends and absent friends...

~ENDS~