

**BVA President John Blackwell
Speech at BVA London Dinner**

on Tuesday 3 February 2015 at One Great George Street, London SW1

- PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

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

I would like to thank all of you for joining us this evening along with my colleagues from the veterinary profession across the country and showing your support for BVA.

In a moment you will hear from Neil Parish MP. Neil has a longstanding interest in many of the issues you will hear about tonight, particularly animal welfare. He is the Chair of the All-Party Group for Animal Welfare and an Honorary Member of BVA. Neil will also feed in the coalition Government's perspective on issues that matter to the veterinary profession and about animal welfare and health in general.

I have in my hand a document with the word "Manifesto" in bold letters on the frontpage.

Even as the President of BVA, the organisation that has produced *this* manifesto, a document I am extremely proud of, I'm under no illusion that this is the only manifesto in town at the moment.

But it is a manifesto that I urge you all to read. And not just read but understand, take to heart and act on. Whatever your political affiliations.

Why?

Because what we do, as vets, matters. I would say that, wouldn't I? And my colleagues and BVA members in the audience are of course nodding in agreement with me. But let me tell you *why* we matter and how you can support us.

If I think of the issues I have been involved with, where we have represented the views of BVA members, in just four months as President, this will give you a starting point.

In that time, BVA and our members have been involved in:

- promoting the highest standards of animal welfare at slaughter
- the nationwide strategy to tackle bovine TB
- detecting and preventing the spread of avian influenza
- helping to combat the threat of antimicrobial resistance
- working towards more responsible dog ownership
- and the very best health and welfare for all companion animals.

And that doesn't even start to scratch the surface of what vets do and deal with in their everyday work.

Now, here's the bad news.

The issues I have just mentioned are live issues, ongoing, still posing a challenge that will require our focus – there is not one where we can comfortably state “we have achieved our goal”.

That's partly because some of these issues don't have a single straightforward answer – they are difficult and complex, often multifactorial from scientific, social, economic and ethical perspectives.

And partly it's because the work we do as vets across society is never a done-and-dusted, 9 to 5 job. Ask any vet on out-of-hours call. To care for animals, to protect human and animal health, requires continual engagement and constant and expert vigilance.

Collectively, those in our profession, whether working in private practice or in government, dealt with the incursion of avian influenza in Yorkshire at the end of last year. And the news today shows just why we need to be ever-vigilant and why the expertise of local vets matters – it was a vet on the ground in Hampshire who, realising that AI could not be excluded from the differentials, sampled for the disease. Both Yorkshire and Hampshire clearly demonstrate the need for continued veterinary engagement at farm level, joined up working with government vets, and continued surveillance.

At the end of last year, we were also part of the All-Party Group for Animal Welfare working group that set before parliament a strategy to improve dog welfare. Unfortunately, we know as vets that this does not mean our work here is complete. So we continue to strive through education and a call for legislation where necessary to make sure all dogs and other companion animals in the UK will have responsible, loving owners who care for them and provide fully for all their welfare needs.

But here's the good news.

I have seen first-hand that the veterinary profession of which I and my colleagues are proud to be members, is up to these challenges and more. When required, we can be nimble, innovative and effect change. When we have to, we will stand together for what we believe is right, both for the profession and for animal welfare.

THEME

That is why I believe so fervently in the theme for my year as BVA President, 'Driving Change - Shaping the Future'.

At the heart of my theme is the need to *drive* change. If vets are to continue as the guardians of animal health and welfare then we need to actively shape the future of

the profession and our role for wider society in relation to both human and animal health and welfare.

That's why *this* manifesto matters.

Because although we may be the expert eyes and ears on the frontline – in the cattle yards and animal rescue centres, in the surgeries and stables – we can't drive change and shape a positive future by ourselves.

We need to work with others and we need political will to make positive and needed change happen, to make a difference. Whatever the outcomes from the General Election in May, this fact won't change. Neither will some of the pressing issues that are confronting veterinary surgeons across the UK, issues that have very real implications for animal welfare and wider society.

I want to talk about some of those pressing issues now.

And I want to start with why a forward-looking government should strategically support vets and the work we do, particularly in the areas of disease surveillance and detection.

DISEASE SURVEILLANCE

When we look back at 2014, disease was in the headlines. No one needs to be reminded of the very serious threat Ebola posed and still poses. Closer to home, avian influenza hit the headlines in November and again this week. A reminder – if we need one – of the frontline work vets do in spotting, identifying and controlling diseases that threaten our livestock and rural economies but can also be real and present dangers to human health.

But those on-the-ground clinicians in the cattle-pen cannot work in isolation. We all of us – government, veterinary surgeons, farmers – need to pull together when we are fighting new and emerging disease threats, which are often zoonotic in nature and which can have pandemic potential.

Where disease in our modern world is concerned, we can only effectively fight it with a robust strategic system of surveillance, however good the pen-side vet is.

Since 2013, the number of Government surveillance post-mortem centres has been reduced from 14 to six in England and Wales, with another laboratory due to close later this year. While we understand the need for rationalisation and efficiency we will always, as veterinary surgeons, put disease prevention and detection first. Our concern is that the surveillance system we have relied on is being dismantled and without the replacement system being properly tested.

What does this concern mean in practice?

If the information coming from post-mortems is not systematically and consistently fed into a central data collection point, then it is a lot harder to join the dots – the very foundation of a robust surveillance system.

As well as identifying the known threats we need a robust mechanism to identify the unknowns.

If there is now a risk that we have a less responsive and accurate diagnosis system, a system that is as yet not joined up and integrated, we leave ourselves vulnerable, less able to spot new and emerging diseases and act quickly to contain them. This risk is multiplied if the *network* of surveillance – that strategic ability to horizon scan – is patchy. We fear this may now be the case. When I qualified back in 1985, BSE was effectively diagnosed because of our network of surveillance laboratories. A network that allowed us to grasp and understand the emerging threat and identify the unknown risk. Are we confident we have the systems in place to spot the next emergent threat, the next BSE?

But out of threats come opportunities and before I turn into a real harbinger of doom, we *are* seeing the profession adapt to the challenge and seize the initiative themselves to positively corral and drive change.

In Wales, independent vets and practices have taken the matter into their own hands and formed a consortium that has recently been awarded a contract to provide post-mortem services within an hour's drive from the former Animal and Plant Health Agency Veterinary Investigation Centre in Aberystwyth. Such nimble and expert local knowledge combined with a robust and strategic surveillance network is a powerful combination in fighting disease.

And it is exactly that nimble, expert and local knowledge that we cannot afford to lose when we consider the vitally important work of Official Veterinarians, better known to many of you as OVs.

OVs AND TENDERING

For many of you in the room, I will not need to tell you that the working arrangements for OVs – who routinely carry out critical disease testing and surveillance, particularly in relation to diseases such as bovine TB – are undergoing fundamental changes. At the heart of these changes are new tendering arrangements, with the introduction of regional lots where testing will be managed through a delivery partner working with, we hope, local vets.

The tender in Wales has been awarded and announced, and we are heartened to learn that both lots have been awarded to local veterinary practitioner-led consortia. The APHA recently also announced that the tender for the five regional lots in England is subject to legal proceedings. BVA of course will not and cannot comment on the specifics while these proceedings are ongoing. But I do want to take this opportunity to remind this audience that BVA opposed the tender system because of our fears that it would undermine a network of disease detection anchored in the local vet/farmer relationship. This concern about the tendering process is still live for vets. As a profession we believe passionately – even more so for those of us who

work with livestock – that whatever the eventual outcomes of the tender, we have to work with government and ultimately any new delivery partner, whoever that may be, to preserve that local knowledge and understanding, that relationship of trust and respect between the farmer and the vet who knows and understands the herd. This is critical for not just disease detection but for disease prevention.

BOVINE TB

As I have said already, as vets, our work is vital in combating diseases that have devastating effects on animal health and welfare and that can also have grave economic and social consequences.

Bovine TB is a scourge that ticks both those boxes,

As an organisation, as a profession, the task of discussing and creating a robust policy position on bovine TB as we continue to work with government and industry to tackle this devastating disease has been neither easy nor straightforward.

We are not alone. Across the UK, the ‘right’ way to tackle this issue has divided the public, politicians, the media and the profession alike. This is what happens in democratic organisations and societies when the issues are not black-and-white, where serious economic loss on the one hand is countered by ethical concerns on the other, where animal welfare in one species is offset by concerns about the culling of another species.

There is no quick fix. No easy answer and some tough decisions to be taken. But the one thing that unites us all is a commitment to finding a way to eradicate this pernicious disease.

BVA continues to support the government’s comprehensive strategy to control and eradicate bovine TB. This includes improved biosecurity, cattle controls, surveillance, farm health planning, and control of the wildlife reservoir of infection by badger vaccination where appropriate and the targeted and humane culling of badgers. And we need more research into vaccine delivery, diagnostics and other humane methods of population control. Defra launched the Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme last autumn. The results will not be immediate but we hope the results when they do come give us insight into the efficacy of vaccinating wildlife and add to our understanding of how to control bovine TB.

In April, BVA Council will consider what we have learned from the pilot culls so far, which as you will know were designed to test the safety, humaneness and effectiveness of controlled shooting. But whatever the outcome of that meeting and whatever the outcome of the elections in May, we know as an organisation, as a profession, that we will need to work together with government and the farming industry to find a way to beat this disease.

AMR

You have already heard me wax lyrical about vets fighting the good fight where disease is concerned. To fight disease, we need the right tools. And some of the most important tools a clinician has to fight disease – in both human and animal health – are antibiotics.

The One Health agenda matters a great deal in the world we live in now.

When we consider antimicrobial resistance and the potential implications for animal and human health, that simple phrase – One Health – has a powerful and profound resonance.

The global threat of antibiotic resistance has shone a spotlight on the use of these vital medicines in both the human and animal sectors.

The European Commission published last year its proposal for a new veterinary medicines regulation. We are currently consulting our members on those proposals and working closely with our colleagues in Europe to ensure that legislation is proportionate to risk and that vets' access to medicines is not limited to the detriment of animal welfare.

We know that the biggest cause of antibiotic resistance in humans is the overuse and misuse, much of it through poor patient compliance, of antibiotics in human medicine. But we cannot be complacent about the role of antibiotic use in veterinary medicine and we are one of the leading voices in the campaign for the responsible use of antibiotics in all species.

We remain committed to the One Health principle and the need for the medical and veterinary professions to work together to tackle antimicrobial resistance.

COMPANION ANIMALS

In promoting that One Health agenda, we need more than an inward gaze. We need to get the messages out to educate and inform the public, particularly our clients, about the misuse of antibiotics. And this includes, of course, pet owners.

BVA's own Voice of the Veterinary Profession survey showed that 9 in 10 vets are concerned about antimicrobial resistance and that 91% of small animal vets are concerned that antimicrobial resistance means they won't be able to treat infections in pets.

We want to support our members to help educate pet owners about the risks of misusing antibiotics and about the proper use of these vital medicines. But we also want to ensure that companion animal vets are not restricted in the medicines they use, that their professionalism and expertise are trusted in making the right decisions for the animals under their care.

And care is the word here. Veterinary surgeons work day and night to help clients understand the needs of their animals and to fulfil their duties as owners. Vets and

veterinary nurses are often the first port of call for advice on animal welfare within the community. As vets, we see what pets mean to people, how they can transform lives and how that human-animal bond can have a positive effect on not just an owner's health and wellbeing, but on wider society as well.

BVA would welcome immensely government support and recognition of the benefits of responsible animal ownership for the health and wellbeing of owners, and the wider benefits for society.

Whatever party – or parties! – form the government post May, I would ask you to put this on your policy agenda. From the work of assistance dogs to the benefits of elderly people in care being able to keep a loved pet close by, this is one of those policy briefs where the words 'joy' and 'happiness' are not extraneous or superfluous but right at the heart of what we are working towards.

ANIMAL WELFARE

And at the heart of that care is animal welfare. The whole veterinary profession champions measures to improve the welfare of all species.

I mentioned at the start of this speech the All-Party Group for Animal Welfare recommendations for improving dog welfare under the next government. These recommendations take in breeding, the sale of puppies and include of course responsible dog ownership.

Again I would ask the next government to put these recommendations – compiled and published in partnership with BVA, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Blue Cross, Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club, PDSA, and the RSPCA, with input from cross-party politicians – on your agenda. And keep it there.

But animal welfare does not start and end with pets. It, of course, includes all animals that vets care for and that we care about.

Where welfare is concerned BVA will also be pushing the next government to both effectively implement current welfare legislation and to review existing legislation where we believe welfare falls short. With the urgent need to tackle the problem of fly-grazing and horse abandonment, we will work with our colleagues in equine practice to secure the update of the current horse passport system, including a central equine database. We will renew efforts to see the implementation of the ban on using wild animals in travelling circuses.

And with overwhelming public support, we will be knocking on the door of the next government to ensure that welfare at slaughter is at the top of the agenda. We will also be doing everything we can to ensure that a full Parliamentary debate takes place.

SLAUGHTER

Last week our e-petition to end non-stun slaughter in the UK surpassed 100,000 signatures two months before it is due to close. This for us is both welcome and

extraordinary. 99.9% of petitions fail to reach 100,000. No one should ignore the strength of public feeling about this issue.

It is one of those moments when we really have worked together, the veterinary profession, animal welfare groups – particularly our colleagues and friends at the RSPCA – and the public, to drive a change we want to see. It would be very easy to sit back on our laurels, and say ‘Job done!’ And we should be proud of what we have achieved so far.

But as I started this speech by saying, there are no easy wins and we cannot afford to be complacent.

This is not the end. It is the start of a new phase of the campaign. We need to push for that debate, ensuring that all arguments are heard and that a vote takes place on this issue.

We also need to acknowledge that winning this fight for animal welfare is not an easy win in another way.

For vets who work with animals and who visit abattoirs as part of their training, ending non-stun slaughter is a matter of basic compassion towards the animals bred for slaughter. It seems straightforward for us.

But we also recognise that there are other views, views that touch on religious and cultural beliefs. And for some, the end of non-stun slaughter will be a profoundly felt loss. We know this and we acknowledge this.

But that does not mean ending non-stun slaughter is not the right thing to do. It is the right thing to do.

BVA has consistently focused on animal welfare at slaughter and never against religious slaughter. We have talked with – and will always be open to talk with – representatives of the communities and religions affected by any ban.

We believe that what we are aiming for, ending unnecessary animal suffering, should be at the forefront of this debate. If you agree with us and with over 100,000 people who signed our petition, please help us and support us in any way you can.

VET FUTURES

Doing the right thing. Not always easy and not always straightforward. But always worth it.

As I come to the conclusion of my speech to you tonight, particularly in the light of the success so far of our non-stun campaign it would be tempting to give BVA and my veterinary colleagues a well-deserved pat on the back.

But there is no time for back patting and complacency – there are many jobs still to do. We as a profession need to do the right thing by ourselves and for the future of the profession. We face some real challenges!.

We should not fight shy of some of those challenges, including some of the well-documented mental health issues amongst the veterinary profession.

The good news is that together with the RCVS we are doing something to tackle these challenges head on.

Vet Futures is one of the most important projects that BVA is undertaking, together with the RCVS, this year.

Launched last year in November, the project will help understand where the provision of veterinary services is currently heading and if that direction of travel is in the best interests of the profession, animal owners and the public at large.

Then we will look at what might be done to shape the best possible future for the veterinary profession, keeping animal health and welfare at its heart. The project is hugely exciting and will help us navigate through the challenges around the corner and get us to a destination where we want to be.

I started with “Our Manifesto for 2015” – a call for action for politicians and policymakers”. Vet Futures is a starting point for action for us all. We need all stakeholders who care about the veterinary profession and its role in animal health and welfare – not just vets – to get involved with these debates.

As Shakespeare wrote – and thankfully he did as it provides a succinct motto for the Vet Futures Project –

“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves”.

Thank you. I am now going to hand over to Neil Parish, someone I can safely say has for a long time been involved in these issues and debates and a great friend to vets and animals alike.