

Speech to the BVA annual London Dinner

Harvey Locke, President of the British Veterinary Association

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~ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~

Secretary of State, my Lords, Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to welcome you here tonight to the British Veterinary Association's annual London dinner. I would like to start by thanking the Right Honourable Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State for the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs for joining us this evening and kindly agreeing to address us on a number of current policy issues within Defra.

But before we hear from Mrs Spelman I would like to spend some time outlining the key issues that the BVA is addressing currently on behalf of the veterinary profession in the UK.

You may be aware that 2011 is World Veterinary Year – celebrating 250 years of the profession since the establishment of the first veterinary school in Lyon, France in 1761.

It's an opportunity for the profession around the globe to look back on its achievements and look forward to future challenges and opportunities.

The veterinary profession has proved itself to be extremely adaptable whilst maintaining its commitment to the concept of One Health – safeguarding both animal and human health and welfare. It is this ability to adapt that inspired the theme for my presidential year – 'Vets in a changing world'.

Looking back on the president's address last year it is abundantly clear that much can happen in a period of twelve months. Although many of the same issues will be discussed tonight all of them have moved forward to a greater or lesser extent.

In this changing world we're also experiencing a new era of coalition politics; of massive cuts in public sector funding set against increasing demand for veterinary services; and of new disease challenges in part as a result of a changing climate.

The fallout from the economic crisis is having a significant impact on policy priorities for all of us. The goalposts have shifted significantly and narrowed the scope of what is possible and affordable.

In the Comprehensive Spending Review Defra took one of the biggest hits. The profession remains deeply concerned that cuts in research and development and disease surveillance could have catastrophic consequences; a view that was echoed by the Trading Standards Institute last week when it said that cuts to animal health and welfare could cost the country far more than it saves.

We understand the immense downward pressure being exerted on Departmental budgets and competing priorities, but we would also caution against the unintended consequences of cuts that will have to be paid for in the future.

The economic pressures are also being felt acutely by the UK's farming communities. Pressure to produce more food, more sustainably and at a lower cost to the consumer is crippling parts of the industry.

Right now the UK enjoys some of the highest animal health and welfare standards in the world and so it is in all of our interests to ensure the viability of the farming sector amidst massive competition from abroad, where those standards may not always be as high.

In January the BVA hosted the inaugural meeting of the Veterinary Development Council – an initiative born out of the Defra-commissioned report on veterinary services by Professor Lowe.

Under the independent chairmanship of Professor Richard Bennett, Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Reading, the VDC brought together representatives from the veterinary profession, veterinary education, government and its agencies, and the livestock and food industries.

We heard at first hand what our customers want and need from the veterinary profession and the clear message to come from the meeting was that the role of the vet in food production and food security cannot be underestimated.

It's fairly simple logic to state that the key to a healthy food supply is healthy animals.

Although we are a relatively small profession, vets provide a network of more than 1300 private food animal practices across the country. We are a highly skilled workforce with local knowledge and expertise and direct access to individual farms.

The Chief Veterinary Officer Nigel Gibbens told the VDC that although government has well-established links to farming leaders, it is private vets who have links to farmers.

Whatever type of practice we are in, we spend time building up relationships with our clients so that we can understand their needs as well as the needs of their animals.

When that client is the Government we know that we are required to deliver healthy, safe food whilst meeting welfare standards and, crucially, we are the first line of defence against disease.

This month marks ten years since the major outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in the UK in 2001; an anniversary that will bring back painful memories for many in the farming and veterinary communities.

Right now Bulgaria and Turkey are battling an outbreak along their shared border and, as someone remarked to me recently, we are now just one holiday away from bringing the disease back into this country.

Disease surveillance is one of the most important but least visible roles of our profession.

At the end of last year Defra carried out an extensive contingency exercise known as Exercise Silver Birch, designed to test the UK's preparedness in the event of another FMD outbreak.

The BVA ran the exercise in real time from day one and engaged our specialist and territorial divisions in feeding messages from the ground back to Defra.

While the Department should be applauded for running such a thorough scenario, it left the BVA and others with many questions. The role of vaccination, the quality of communication channels and the adequacy of existing tracing systems are all serious issues that must be addressed when the Government reports back on the exercise.

Another crucial issue highlighted by the exercise was the Government's ability to mobilise contingency OVs or Official Veterinarians – private veterinary practitioners who carry out disease surveillance and other work on behalf of the Government.

Last year my predecessor Bill Reilly spoke about the future funding of services carried out by OVs. At the time we had reached an impasse with Animal Health as the BVA expected a professional fee for a professional service whilst Animal Health pushed to reduce the cost of TB testing.

It is no secret that the last year has been difficult and the relationship between the BVA and Animal Health has, at times, been strained.

But I'm pleased to report that I believe we are entering a new stage in our relationship with both sides committed to an outcome that secures better animal health and welfare and better public health without undermining the need for disease surveillance to be affordable for all involved.

We want to deliver a meaningful partnership between government and private veterinary practices and we are committed to finding new ways of working with the newly merged Animal Health and VLA (Veterinary Laboratories Agency) agencies.

Any future partnership needs to successfully deliver the TB strategy in England and I would like to thank you Secretary of State for putting bovine TB at the top of Defra's agenda.

The BVA has long argued that in order to tackle the disease in cattle we must also have effective measures to control the disease in wildlife, and we therefore welcomed the consultation on plans to cull and vaccinate badgers alongside more stringent cattle measures.

TB is blighting parts of the UK, and where it is endemic, animal health and welfare are seriously compromised and businesses destroyed.

We understand that the Coalition Government's plans for tackling the disease in wildlife are deeply unpopular amongst some very vocal organisations and individuals, but I hope this will not deter Ministers from taking the necessary steps to eradicate this devastating disease. We look forward very much to hearing the Defra response to the consultation shortly.

Whatever happens, vets will continue to be at the forefront of managing TB and other animal diseases. But our role as the guardians of animal health and welfare faces an uncertain future following the announcement that the cap on tuition fees will be raised to between 6 and 9 thousand pounds a year. We fear this could have a huge impact on the decisions of A-level students, with fewer and fewer opting for an expensive veterinary science degree.

The BVA has been campaigning for many years to improve the financial situation for veterinary students who suffer the double whammy of an unsubsidised long course and additional financial burden of compulsory Extra Mural Studies (or EMS).

Veterinary students study for 5 or 6 years and, unlike medical and dentistry students, receive no contribution towards their fees. On top of the additional cost of fees, vet students face the costs of attending 38 weeks of compulsory EMS during the holiday periods when other students are able to

earn cash in a summer job. Many EMS placements require students to pay for their own accommodation and transport costs, which often means having access to a car.

Although the plans are not yet finalised we are bracing ourselves for veterinary degrees, which are costly to run, to be priced at the top of the scale, meaning veterinary students of the future will graduate with at least £45,000 of debt in tuition fees alone.

Faced with these levels of debt, our concern is that those who do make it to graduation won't opt for the food animal practice and public health roles that attract smaller pay packages.

We need to think carefully about how we can secure the future provision of large animal practitioners.

Last year I wrote to Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Vince Cable, outlining our concerns regarding the funding of veterinary degrees, and explaining the unique financial disadvantages that veterinary students face.

As a profession we are putting considerable efforts into trying to encourage entry from a wide range of social backgrounds. So we are now in a dialogue with the Department to try to secure access to additional loan streams for veterinary students. Although this is not a solution to the rising levels of debt that veterinary graduates will have to face, it would mean that veterinary science can still be an option for young people from less affluent backgrounds as it would provide the necessary cashflow to allow them to complete the course.

Earlier today we had a very positive meeting with the heads of the UK's seven veterinary schools and I'm delighted they could all join us this evening. The issue of student finance is one that we will need to tackle in partnership with the schools and the RCVS.

I would like now to move on to a number of key small animal issues and will start with an issue that has been extremely important to me throughout my veterinary career; that of dog health and welfare.

You will all be aware of the evolution of this issue since the broadcasting of Pedigree Dogs Exposed in 2008. This time last year Sir Patrick Bateson had just published his report, which recommended the creation of an independent council and in less than twelve months the Advisory Council on the Welfare Issues of Dog Breeding had held its first meeting under the chairmanship of veterinary surgeon Professor Sheila Crispin.

The Council has set itself important goals and committed itself to gathering useful data in order to tackle the most serious welfare problems. Both individual vets in practice and the veterinary profession at large have a key role to play in addressing the health and welfare problems in dogs.

We experience at first hand the devastating results of inherited diseases, inbreeding and irresponsible breeding. We are also in an ideal position to educate the animal-owning public and hopefully influence them to make the right welfare choices. Our mantra is to talk to your vet *before* you choose your pet and it is a message that needs to get out to the general public.

But while the BVA fully supports the Advisory Council, we would urge the Government not to use it to delay decisions that might improve the health and welfare of dogs now.

At a recent meeting of the Associate Parliamentary Group on Animal Welfare (APGAW), attended by the main dog welfare organisations and addressed by Sheila Crispin, there was overwhelming support for provision for healthy breeding to be brought into Defra's welfare codes.

We have long maintained that to ignore breeding in the dog welfare code is a serious oversight by Defra. In England we already have regulations that protect our farmed animals from breeding procedures that cause suffering or injury, but not for our pets.

This contradictory approach makes little sense. Updating the welfare codes to include breeding would send a clear message that the Government is committed to improving the health and welfare of man's best friend.

My predecessor Bill Reilly used the opportunity of this dinner last year to call for the repeal and reform of the failed Dangerous Dogs Act and within 3 weeks Defra announced a consultation on amending or replacing the Act.

Although the consultation closed last June, we are still waiting for the Government's response. In November we were told that a massive 88% of respondents do not believe the existing legislation is effective in protecting the public, 77% agree with the BVA that breed-specific legislation, which bans particular types of dog, should be repealed, and 84% want to see compulsory microchipping and registration of all dogs.

Despite this overwhelming call from the public, the Government has kept its powder dry, repeatedly promising to announce its response soon.

Frustratingly, we all know that the current situation is untenable. So it's what happens next that is important.

Secretary of State I would like to assure you that the BVA is prepared to work with all of the other organisations with an interest in dog welfare and public safety to find an effective solution.

We all want to see people protected on private property; legislation that targets irresponsible owners and not just the way a dog looks; and tools that allow the police and other enforcement agencies to act swiftly to protect the public.

And, crucially, we all want to work with you to achieve these aims.

To end tonight I'd like to come back to my theme of 'vets in a changing world' and the ever-present threat of new and emerging exotic diseases. Over the last few years the BVA and Defra have been lobbying in Europe for additional control measures to be maintained under the Pet Travel Scheme to protect the UK from rabies, zoonotic tapeworms, and diseases transmitted by ticks.

We have appreciated very much our close collaboration with Defra on this issue, particularly the Government's commitment to keeping *echinococcus multilocularis* out of the country. This tapeworm causes one of the nastiest zoonotic diseases known to man and is fatal for humans in 90% of cases that are left untreated.

We do not have this disease in the UK but it is spreading across mainland Europe. Once it becomes established in wildlife it is practically impossible to eradicate. Surely, the phrase "prevention is better than cure" is never more appropriate than in the case of *E multilocularis*.

I am aware that we can expect an announcement on this issue in the next few weeks as we move towards harmonisation of the pet travel rules across the EU at the end of 2011.

Again the veterinary profession will have a key role to play in educating and informing pet owners of the changes to the scheme and advise them on the best way to keep their own animals safe and keep the UK free from diseases that affect other parts of the EU and beyond.

In lobbying for continuing protection for the UK the BVA is upholding its commitment to the concept of One Health, the very foundation of the veterinary profession.

I hope I have provided you all with some food for thought and topics for discussion this evening.

I would now like to warmly welcome the Rt Hon Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State for Defra, who has very kindly agreed to respond on behalf of our guests and provide an insight into the Coalition Government's perspective on some of these issues.

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