

## BVA President Prof Bill Reilly's speech at the BVA North of Ireland Dinner

on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2009 at Parliament Buildings, Stormont

~ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~

As you all know, this is the first of my annual dinners in the devolved administrations as President of the BVA. When planning a speech like this, you know from the outset that there will be a few core topics that will almost always come up. I must admit there was a temptation to see what the Past-President said last year and recycle some of her material!

But, actually, looking back over the last twelve months, a huge amount has changed and – I'm pleased to say – it's been a lot of positive change, and I hope to touch on a number of those achievements this evening.

But before I go into the detail of our current policy interests and concerns, I must explain that one of my themes for this presidential year is vets and the public good. I was therefore delighted to learn that the University of Ulster and University College Dublin recently joined up to offer an innovative postgraduate qualification in Veterinary Public Health. As someone who gave more than 30 years of my working life to public health I may have a vested interest here, but even objectively this can only be seen as a great step forward for animal and human health and welfare on the island of Ireland.

So now I've declared where my veterinary loyalties lie, I'd also like to mention my other major interest – devolution. And specifically the delivery of animal health and welfare in a devolved setting. This year marks 10 years of devolution for Scotland and Wales and much of the debate at our recent BVA Congress in Cardiff focused on the success or otherwise of the veterinary profession in delivering differing policies across the UK whilst still achieving common aims.

For a UK-wide organisation like the BVA, it is vital to have a handle on what is happening in all four corners of the country and to facilitate the necessary information sharing amongst the profession. We were therefore delighted to secure a panel discussion with the UK's four CVOs and heartened to hear how well the four coordinate on all manner of issues (despite being from three different vet schools!!).

In policy terms, perhaps the most obvious example of the impact of devolution is bovine TB. As you know this is an issue that affects the four nations of the UK in different ways. Earlier this year we were pleased to see the endorsement of Scotland's application for Officially Tuberculosis Free-status but urged vets and farmers to keep up stringent disease controls. In Wales the Minister recently announced steps to move forward with a targeted badger cull in the west of the country – a move welcomed by the BVA. In England, we recently supported the TB Eradication Group's acknowledgement that there is no one measure, no silver bullet, that can address the problem. Although we continue to be frustrated at the lack of ministerial support for a targeted badger cull in England, we support the vaccination deployment project as another tool in the box whilst continuing to make the case for a more effective strategy to tackle the disease in wildlife species.

Meanwhile, here in Northern Ireland the TB strategy must also take into consideration what is happening in the South. TB incidence in Northern Ireland has been falling, yet there are no areas that are clear of the disease. You will be watching the projects in England and Wales with much interest and I can tell you that the rest of the UK certainly looks forward to seeing the results of the Northern Ireland studies on the prevalence of TB in badgers. On such a highly emotive issue, we vets must always endeavour to inject the reality of science.

In the same debate at Congress the four CVOs were asked which disease, other than TB, they would eradicate in their country if money and politics were no object. I hope I'm not landing the Chief Veterinary Officer Bert Houston in it when I tell you that his very straight answer was bovine brucellosis. And I'm sure that won't surprise many people here – brucellosis is a terrible disease.

In July the South was celebrating its newly-acquired disease-free status and I understand that your Assembly has similar aspirations for Northern Ireland in the near future so that the entire island of Ireland will be brucellosis-free. The signs look good, with the incidence of the disease going down and the introduction of new techniques to understand the spread of the disease by identifying its DNA fingerprint. I sincerely hope that with continued emphasis and commitment from all sides you will succeed in its eradication... and make Bert's wish come true!

Of course disease eradication is high on all of our wish lists and forms part of the UK Government's thinking behind responsibility and cost sharing. It is another example of how policies are rolled out differently in the four nations of the UK, with all but England waiting on the EU proposals, expected in 2011, before making a firm decision on how to implement RCS. The BVA has made no secret of the fact that we are deeply concerned about Defra's current plans for England, in particular the separation of animal health from animal welfare and the lack of a clear line of command in the event of a disease outbreak.

I have been appointed to the Advisory Group on responsibility and cost sharing and as one of four vets on the Group I shall endeavour to provide a strong voice to state our case. But I'm under no illusion about the uphill struggle I face.

You will be aware that farmers in England do not readily accept the Government's arguments for the proposal, but I believe that in the current financial climate ongoing discussion and dialogue is needed if we are to maintain the protection that the industry, and indeed the economy, needs from outbreaks of epizootic disease.

These are all issues that the devolved nations will face in time as each country considers how it will take RCS forward so I urge you to start thinking about it sooner rather than later and to learn from what's happening in England.

Of course, there are many benefits to shared responsibility and cooperation between government and industry. Perhaps the most recent example of this here is the achievement of Annex II status on Aujeszky's disease – formal recognition by the European Commission of the disease eradication programme.

Great Britain has been officially free of Aujeszky's since 1991. The recent announcement of Annex II status is therefore a real feather in the cap for the members of the working group, including DARD, the Ulster Farmers Union, AFBI, producers and processors, and, importantly from our point of view, private veterinary practitioners. This partnership between government, industry and vets has shown what can be achieved when we all work together.

The list of positives in Northern Ireland continues with two current pieces of proposed legislation – the Diseases of Animals Bill and the Animal Welfare Bill – both very much to the fore in the mind of your Minister at the moment.

Again as a public health vet I personally welcome moves in the Diseases of Animals Bill to increase on-farm biosecurity as a preventative measure. This is something that veterinary colleagues can and should play a key role in and I hope the Bill can be progressed successfully in the coming months.

Animal welfare is an issue on which vets can easily be sidelined by a number of other organisations. But it is an issue that we are dealing with on a daily basis and one that cuts across all of our work. Welfare is a highly emotive issue but as scientists I believe we can champion it in a way that reaches a wider audience.

Nationally the BVA's Ethics and Welfare Group and the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation are already doing a huge amount of work to promote animal welfare through science and education. The EWG has been bold in a number of policy positions it has taken recently and we are working hard to make sure people listen to those messages.

We therefore welcome the Minister's commitment to bring forward new animal welfare legislation by June 2010. I know that a lot of work with stakeholders has already been undertaken and I hope that the veterinary voice will be echoed in the Animal Welfare Bill. To my veterinary colleagues I'd say: if this is not already on your radars, it should be.

Under animal welfare legislation in the rest of UK the docking of dog's tails has been banned and I am aware that here in Northern Ireland you are currently grappling with this issue. Along with the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, the BVA has stated clearly that the non-therapeutic docking of dog's tails should be banned. Puppies suffer unnecessary pain as a result of docking and are deprived of a vital form of canine expression. If the procedure is poorly carried out, it can also result in chronic pain. I am pleased that the agriculture committee is represented here tonight and I hope that you will take back this strong message to the committee when considering the ban.

Dogs are also hitting the headlines through the recent announcement of new control measures. I was shocked to read that one third of all dogs destroyed in the UK are in Northern Ireland – clearly the dual problems of dangerous and stray dogs are an enormous drain on your resources.

We welcome your commitment to promoting responsible pet ownership, but we are disappointed with the proposal to retain breed-specific legislation. The manner in which a dog behaves is both a result of its inherited characteristics and, more importantly, the rearing and training provided by its owner. We know that aggression is a normal behaviour and can be shown by any dog of any breed, type or mixed breeding. Breed-specific legislation therefore engenders a false and dangerous perception that breeds not banned will not show aggression. I would urge the Minister to rethink her position on this issue and shift the focus of control to 'deed not breed', alongside a concerted campaign to promote responsible pet ownership.

Another facet of responsible pet ownership in which the BVA is currently active is working towards extending the transitional arrangements on pet travel for the UK, Ireland and three other Member States. To promote EU Veterinary Week and BVA Congress the BVA and BSAVA launched a poster campaign to remind pet owners of the need to protect their animals from exotic diseases when travelling abroad.

We are keen to educate pet owners on the risks and encourage them to plan ahead with their vets so that they can protect their pets as well as themselves from diseases such as rabies, leishmaniasis and Echinococcus multilocularis. We are also working with the Federation of Veterinarians in Europe (FVE) and Defra to lobby the European Parliament and Council to agree the extension on the transitional arrangements that will hopefully allow the eradication of rabies within the EU before the harmonisation of pet travel rules. At the moment, all I can say is watch this space!

In conclusion I return to my theme of vets and the public good. Many of you will be aware of Professor Lowe's report on vets and veterinary services. The BVA's Veterinary Policy Group will be hearing from Phillip Lowe at its meeting next week to discuss the implications of the report. We view this as an opportunity to take stock of where we are and where we are going.

Over the years vets have adapted to many changes and the profession has never shied away from challenges. We are both a knowledgeable resource and good value for money and I would urge all governments to see us in that light and not just a provider of TB services.

Minister, we are delighted that you are here with us this evening. I hope that I have provided you with some food for thought and I know we are all keen to hear from your perspective where animal health and welfare is heading in Northern Ireland.

But first may I ask my fellow BVA members to raise a toast to our distinguished guests in thanks for their ongoing support for the BVA and the veterinary profession as a whole.