Getting points across

THE BVA’s annual London dinner, like similar events held each year in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, provides an opportunity for the Association’s President to highlight issues of concern to the veterinary profession among politicians, journalists and opinion formers. Judging from the speech given by the current President, Bill Reilly, at this year’s event, which covered matters ranging from dangerous dogs to the control of bovine TB (see pp 249-250 of this issue), there is no shortage of issues to address.

Discussing ‘vets and the public good’, Professor Reilly noted that vets play a vital role in this, whether by contributing to food security, safeguarding public health or ensuring the health of pets. However, he felt that their contribution was under-appreciated by the public and, more worryingly, by the Government. This was being demonstrated by the current dispute between the BVA and Animal Health over fees for Official Veterinarians (OVs), who play a vital role in disease surveillance and control and in safeguarding the farming industry, food production and public health. The BVA, the President said, had not walked away from further negotiations with Animal Health – but it had taken a strong stand on behalf of the profession.

On bovine TB, Professor Reilly noted that the BVA continued to applaud the decision of the Welsh Assembly Government to include a targeted badger cull in its TB eradication policy because, he said, ‘Only by addressing cattle and wildlife simultaneously will we start to get on top of TB. There are clear animal health, animal welfare, public health and economic reasons for stronger measures’.

Referring to the Government’s proposals on responsibility and cost sharing and its recently published draft Animal Health Bill, Professor Reilly said that the principle of responsibility and cost sharing was welcome, particularly if it achieved better animal health and welfare by incentivising good practice and penalising bad. However, the BVA remained unconvinced of the need for the proposed non-departmental body to make and implement animal health policy. Although the Association was pleased that the Government had listened to its call to separate the English and UK roles of the Chief Veterinary Officer, it was frustrated that the Government was still proposing that animal health policy and animal welfare policy should be split under the new arrangements, with Defra ministers retaining responsibility for welfare. This was despite opposition from all those with an interest in animal health and welfare and made ‘a nonsense’ of the consultation process. ‘Health and welfare are inextricably linked;’ he said, ‘and cannot be split without detriment to both.’

Turning to companion animals, the President noted that, although controversial, the TV programme Pedigree Dogs Exposed turned out to be an important catalyst in changing thinking about the breeding and selling of dogs. The veterinary profession had a major role to play in moving things forward and, although it would take a lot of time and cooperation from everyone involved, progress was already being made.

He also commented on the future of the UK’s Pet Travel Scheme, as EU rules on the non-commercial movement of pets are harmonised. While respecting that the ultimate aim was for all EU member states to have the same entry rules for travelling pets, the veterinary profession had raised concerns that the science did not yet support the case for full harmonisation. On this issue the profession had enjoyed an excellent relationship with Defra and would continue to press for further research to help ensure that the UK was protected.

With a General Election looming, the President concluded his speech by calling for repeal and reform of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. Replacing the Act with a policy based on ‘deed not breed’ would, he suggested, tick all the right boxes in political terms: it would be tough on antisocial behaviour and crime, strong on animal welfare and could save the public purse a lot of money. ‘It’s what you might call a no-brainer,’ he said, ‘but for some reason Westminster politicians have yet to see it.’

Responding to the President’s remarks, Lord Davies of Oldham, Defra’s undersecretary of state in the House of Lords, said the Government does value the contribution that vets make to society, and that the need to carefully manage reducing resources by making increasingly tough decisions should not be confused with a lack of regard for the work vets do in many vital areas. While acknowledging the points that had been made, he also made clear that the Government did not necessarily agree with all of them and would be continuing with existing policies in a number of areas.

Parliamentarians across the political spectrum will have much on their minds as an election approaches, and the profession must continue to work hard in getting its views across.

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Comment