

FSA Chair's speech to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)

FSA Chair Professor Susan Jebb addressed Royal College Day 2024, the RCVS' annual celebration of achievement within the veterinary and veterinary nursing professions, on Friday 5 July 2024. Prof Jebb spoke about the role of vets in the food system and the challenges and opportunities facing the profession.

Thank you to Sue for the kind invitation to speak at this important event in the RCVS calendar. It's a real pleasure to be here and wonderful to hear the achievements of these exceptional vets, nurses, and associates.

Last year, I was delighted that the FSA Veterinary Animal Welfare lead Collin Willson won the RCVS Impact Award for his work on animal welfare at slaughter, to the benefit of millions of animals every year. I'm proud to say he was also awarded an OBE earlier this year for his work on animal welfare and public health in the meat industry. I work with members of the veterinary profession, like Collin, every day and recognise the significant, and often unsung, difference they make for animals, society, and the environment.

Today, I want to celebrate the vital role vets and vet teams play in the food system and I'll focus on those which are especially important to the FSA, such as the One Health agenda and environmental sustainability. Then I'll talk about the FSA's specific role in the delivery of official controls for meat, the challenges I see facing the profession, especially in this area and finish with some of the work we are doing in the FSA to support and develop the vet workforce.

We live in a rapidly changing world where people and animals live closely together and are more interconnected than ever. As a nutrition scientist, I'm now rather embarrassed to say that for much of my career I didn't think much about how vets impacted the food system. But the One Health concept has been transformational in my thinking, and it's had a hugely positive impact in the way it has brought different disciplines together.

The World Health Organization describes One Health as an integrated and unified approach to sustainably balance and optimise the health of people, animals and ecosystems, recognising that the health of humans, animals, plants, and the wider environment are closely linked and interdependent.

I know that the majority of the veterinary profession work in clinical practice, where One Health is most often thought of through the human-animal bond, the environmental impact of livestock, or veterinary medicines contamination. In the FSA, our vets practice One Health through a veterinary public health lens, mindful of the risks of disease transfer through food and feed, meat hygiene, and global food production.

Around 60% of current human infectious diseases are zoonotic, and about 75% of emerging diseases such as Ebola or influenza have an animal origin. This brings into sharp focus the important role for vets in public health, both at home and internationally, as well as protecting animal health and welfare.

The FSA tracks foodborne disease and there are 2.4 million cases of illness every year, more than 16,000 people end up in hospital and sadly around 160 people die. There is a very human cost, a cost to the NHS and to businesses, who in the worst cases may never recover from the adverse publicity surrounding a food incident. Most of these cases of food-borne disease are caused by a handful of bacteria-types which enter the food chain from farmed animals or the environment, so we need to work from “farm to fork” to address this major public health risk.

The agri-food supply chain poses a real risk for the transmission of antimicrobial resistance through food, animals, humans, and water.

A key part of the One Health agenda is to reduce the use of antimicrobials in food production animals and we work as part of the Government's strategy for tackling anti-microbial resistance. So, FSA is working with vets across the food industry to encourage changes in practice including improvements in animal husbandry and biosecurity, to reduce the threat of anti-microbial resistance. Great to see some of the leaders on this being recognised in awards today.

Thank you to all of you who have played a role in the success the UK has made in this to date – a 59% decrease in sales of veterinary antibiotics for use in food-producing animals since 2014 is truly a great achievement.

Underpinning this work, the FSA leads a cross-government programme called PATH-SAFE which stands for Pathogen Surveillance in Agriculture, Food and Environment. PATH-SAFE is a research programme which aims to develop a national surveillance network to improve the detection and tracking of foodborne human pathogens and antimicrobial resistance through the whole agri-food system from farm-to-fork. A better understanding of the routes of transmission will enable us to better protect consumers and minimise the economic impact of outbreaks.

Moving on, Sue asked me to say a few words about the role of livestock in environmental sustainability. When I was appointed as Chair of the FSA I led the introduction of a new strategy to guide our work, recognising that consumers want food that is safe, of course, but increasingly they want food that is healthier and more sustainable too and in our role to represent consumer interests in food in policymaking we need to be able to articulate a vision for a food system that delivers this.

And here I should acknowledge that I have an interest as an academic in these wider topics. I'm a nutrition scientist by training and when I'm not at the FSA I lead a research team at the University of Oxford. Much of my work relates to health and the prevention and treatment of obesity and NCDs, but I recently co-led a research programme called LEAP – Livestock, Environment and People, funded by the Wellcome Trust, that was strongly grounded in concerns about environmental sustainability – and, as the name suggests, with a particular focus on meat.

Meat is an important source of vital nutrients and while it is possible to eat a nutritious diet without meat or dairy, it takes great care to do so, and at a population level I would worry about nutritional deficiencies on vegan diets. Our colleagues in Food Standards Scotland recently published a report commissioned from the University of Edinburgh highlighting the risks. But we need to acknowledge that meat, specifically red meat, is associated with an increased risk of colorectal cancer and heart disease. To balance these two aspects, the government scientific advisory committee on nutrition, SACN, recommend that we should limit consumption of red meat to no more than 70g/day. That's close to the average intake of the population, but it does mean that people who eat a lot of red meat are advised to cut down to reduce their health risks.

Livestock production is also a source of significant environmental harm. It uses three quarters of agricultural land and is responsible for about 15% of all GHG emissions. Agriculture uses more freshwater than any other human activity and nearly a third is required for livestock. It impacts biodiversity through land conversion to pasture or for arable feed crops and it is a significant source of nitrogen, phosphorus and other pollutants. But meat produced in the UK is, in large

part, a lesser concern than in areas of the world that are water-stressed or where forests are cut down to create new spaces for grazing or crops.

Consumption of meat is declining in the UK, but while global demand for meat remains high, it makes sense for the UK to continue to produce it and to do so to the highest standards we can – to protect the environment and animal welfare – and to showcase what can be done to minimise the environmental impact. However, we can do this alongside recognising that we need to limit global demand as part of a sustainable food system and ensure that the meat we do produce is equitably distributed. For the UK that means eating a little bit less meat, which will reduce our risk of NCDs and allow people in countries with very low meat intake and who want to eat more, to benefit from the nutrients meat provides.

We, as individuals, can make conscious choices that can contribute to a more sustainable food system, but we also rely on government policies and strategies to accelerate the pace of change.

At the FSA, we see a specific opportunity to encourage more sustainable production practices through our work to authorise animal feed. For example, Defra held a public consultation in 2022 on the use of methane-reducing feed products and signalled the importance of this in their response to the National Food Strategy.

It's the FSA's responsibility to ensure that innovative food and feed products are assessed for safety before they are placed on the market. Last year, we authorised the first feed additive which targets methane-reduction in cattle. 3-nitrooxypropanal, or '3-NOP', is designed to block a metabolic pathway in the production of methane, reducing its production by 21-33%. Similarly, some other feed materials, such as dried seaweed or garlic, may also have methane-reducing potential so important for sustainability.

Now I want to shift from global matters to those on our doorstep and to talk more specifically about the role of the FSA and the work of our vets in delivering official controls. At lunch I was talking to Tim, one of your lay council members, about the formation of the FSA, nearly a quarter of a century ago, so a brief reminder.

The FSA is an independent, non-ministerial government department, set up in primary legislation. We are not a quango, or an ALB, we receive our funding direct from the Treasury. We work across England, Northern Ireland and Wales and with FSS to protect the nation's plates.

The FSA was set up following several high-profile food scandals, most notably the BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis) crisis – which many of you will remember – with the intention of separating food safety from the vested interests of the food industry. Our mission is "Food you can trust". By this we mean that consumers can trust that the food they buy and eat is safe and is what it says it is. Veterinary professionals are a crucial component in delivering this work.

In response to BSE, we conducted risk assessments to understand the spread of BSE and its potential impact on human health, we implemented strict controls to prevent BSE-contaminated meat from entering the food chain, supported research that informed policy decisions and communicated with the public about risk and food handling practices. The FSA played a crucial role in addressing the crisis with the European Commission adopting recommendations from the FSA on tightening BSE controls in EU countries.

I am now delighted to say that we are working with Defra on the application to the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) for official recognition of BSE negligible risk status for England, Wales and Scotland.

However, incidents, like BSE, cost the UK food industry dearly, not just financially, but also in terms of the trust of consumers and international trading partners. The BSE crisis, for example, not only cost lives, but also cost the UK beef industry £900m – around £2.2bn in today's prices.

To provide further context on the impacts, the UK only resumed beef exports to the US in 2020 - more than two decades later.

Official controls for meat are intended to reduce the risk of incidents like this happening again, they ensure fresh meat is fit for human consumption through the required ante-mortem and post-mortem health inspections and residue sampling as well as ensuring unfit product is disposed of correctly by abattoirs.

So, I'd now like to turn to the role of vets in the FSA. As required by the legislation, they provide the 'Official Controls' at abattoirs, mostly through our service delivery partner who employs 260 Official Veterinarians working in FSA approved abattoirs in England and Wales and other key points along the agri-food chain. Without official veterinarians delivering these controls there is a risk that many meat establishments will be unable to operate. This could lead to food safety issues, such as increased risk of illegal slaughter, and welfare issues for animals unable to move to slaughter.

But our vets do so much more. We employ around 1500 people directly within the FSA, of which 5% (77 people), 1 in 20, are vets working in field operations, science, evidence, policy, and trade. The work undertaken by our vets is critical in protecting public health, managing the risk of disease through food, and maintaining welfare standards.

Our vets help keep food safe by developing food safety regulations, monitoring food safety inspection systems, and carrying out inspections in meat, dairy, and wine industries. Vets delivering official controls also make sure processes are as efficient as possible, while maintaining public health protection. The veterinary role in certification, import control systems and collection of animal disease and welfare data also play a vital role in promoting sustainability by improving disease control, ensuring efficiency, and reducing emissions and pollution.

And here are some facts. Our vets in the FSA, and those working for our delivery partner, inspect in the region of 1bn animals annually and conduct more than 800 unannounced inspections in FSA-approved cutting plants, and 300 animal welfare assurance visits in FSA approved abattoirs. Vets working across the meat sector underpin the economy, providing value to the £9bn domestic meat industry and the £2bn meat export trade.

Now, more than ever, and particularly since the UK left the EU, the work of government veterinarians is essential to facilitate safe international trade in products of animal origin and animal by-products. FSA vets work across the system to investigate non-compliances raised by trading partners, issue health certificates for animal products destined for exports, protect our borders, advise on trade agreements, and carry out third country audits and assessments. They ensure that our trading partners meet the import requirements for trading with the UK.

Our contributions to negotiations on current and future trade agreements with the EU and non-EU countries have been, and always will be, essential to manage biosecurity, public health and food safety risks from food imported into the UK.

This is why we are working across government to make these public health careers more appealing to UK veterinary graduates through a partnership approach across Government and with the RCVS, BVA and Vet Schools.

So, it's not a surprise that the FSA is deeply concerned about current workforce shortages.

In our annual report on food standards last year, we drew specific attention to this issue. We pointed out that between 2019 and 2021, there was a 27% fall in vets entering the profession in the UK, yet the demands on vets and vet teams have only increased. It is particularly concerning that the rate of vets leaving the profession has increased by 62% since 2016 - a total of 2045 vets left the UK-practising category in 2020.

As a consequence we have an increasingly competitive veterinary jobs market. This is good news for vets, and we absolutely want to see them - you! - paid appropriately, but it's hard for the public sector to keep pace with rising salaries in private practice. The UK is also now a less attractive option for overseas vets with new visa and enhanced language entry requirements for EU vets post EU Exit.

These recruitment and retention issues are challenging across the profession and are especially acute for the FSA and its delivery partner seeking OV's to work in the meat sector.

Just 4% (11 vets) of OV posts in England and Wales are currently held by UK trained vets. It's not just that there aren't enough trained vets, we are well aware that newly graduated UK vets rarely choose public health veterinary roles. The head of one of the vet schools said to me "until there is an oversupply of vets, there will be an under supply in abattoirs". We need to change that.

We were therefore very pleased to contribute to the recent EFRA evidence session on the vet workforce and encouraged by the strength of the recommendations they made to Ministers. We will continue to press this agenda with new Ministers and look forward to working with you and others to drive positive change.

But it will take time – so meanwhile, what are we doing in the FSA? First, we need to face the realities; we need to continue to invest in overseas recruitment, which includes providing routes for vets to seek the additional skills they may need, to work in the UK. The RCVS's Temporary Registration scheme has, and continues to be, a vital part of ensuring we still have access to the skilled veterinary workforce we need and we really appreciate your support in enabling us to operate this scheme. We have been working with our service delivery partner to reduce our reliance on temporary registration and we have made substantial progress, but we know we have more to do.

We also know that the sustainable solution is to make veterinary public health roles more attractive. We need to encourage veterinarians from a diverse range of backgrounds to understand how satisfying these roles can be and champion the contribution they make to the safety of the nation. In November last year, I was delighted when I heard FSA had won the first non-clinical workplace BVA wellbeing award which recognised the FSA's approach to positive workplace culture.

Now I'd like to read a quote from a UK trained vet currently delivering official controls in abattoirs:

"My favourite part about the OV role is feeling like you are having a direct impact on such an important industry. You are on the front line for ensuring food safety and animal welfare within the meat industry, and the potential to make a difference is huge... The work done by OV's and MHIs will directly impact millions of people within the UK and the rest of the world with the food that makes its way onto supermarket shelves and is exported across the globe. This work is not only vital, but a fantastic network to be a part of."

I was delighted to attend the official opening of the Harper-Keele vet school last summer and to talk with the students and teachers. FSA veterinary colleagues regularly engage with schools through lectures, career days, and career talks.

Together with our service delivery partner we have developed and implemented complementary Extra Mural Studies (EMS) programmes to widen veterinary students' knowledge and gain practical experience in a government veterinary role. The FSA week-long EMS placement focuses on both operational and office-based experiences, allowing students to see the diverse range of veterinary roles available at the FSA and learn about different veterinary working environments and we now run our FSA EMS week twice per year. We were delighted that your new President joined our EMS students and three graduates looking at "diversifying" their veterinary careers, last week, thank you Linda, and we have received excellent student feedback.

So let me end with a couple of thoughts. I hope you have heard how much we need - and value – the vets working in the FSA and in public health more generally. We want to work with you in a way that is good for your profession too.

The challenges we face won't disappear now the election is over, and we are committed to working across government and with you, the BVA and other stakeholders to find solutions. I can promise you that these issues are on my list of early day conversations with new Ministers. Most importantly, securing a new Vet Surgeons Act – hopefully before its 60th birthday in 2026, and establishing better career pathways to attract and retain talent, among the UK trained workforce.

And outside government, as I talk to friends and family about some of my experiences at the FSA and the work I see our vets doing, it's evident to me that we need to change the perception and culture around 'what being a vet means'. I loved the James Herriot books and TV programmes when I was growing up, but we need some modern veterinary role models, grappling with some of the issues beyond a small practice. A vet can have several careers in a lifetime, all while being a vet and that's an enviable position that not many other professionals have the privilege to enjoy.

I hope today has been a reminder of that as you've met up with friends and colleagues who may have followed different paths, and celebrated some of the great achievements of the year and if it's made you think again about opportunities for vets in public health and the global food system, please do get in touch with me or any of the brilliant vets we have working at the FSA and encourage your trainees to do so too.

Thank you.