



Select Committee on the European Union

Environment Sub-Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Future UK-EU relations: energy, environment and health

Wednesday 20 January 2021

11.05 am

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Members present: Lord Teverson (The Chair); Baroness Brown of Cambridge; Lord Cameron of Dillington; Lord Carter of Coles; Lord Giddens; Baroness Jolly; Baroness McIntosh of Pickering; The Duke of Montrose; The Earl of Stair; Lord Young of Norwood Green.

Evidence Session No. 2

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 10 - 16

Witnesses

[I](#): Mandisa Greene, President, Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons; James Russell, President, British Veterinary Association; Professor Susan Dawson, Dean, School of Veterinary Science.

Examination of witnesses

Mandisa Greene, James Russell and Professor Susan Dawson.

Q10 The Chair: Welcome to the second witness session of our inquiry into future UK-EU relations for the energy, environment and health sectors. In this session we are looking particularly at the veterinary sector and its capacity issues in terms of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the EU. This Committee has spent quite a considerable time in the past on veterinary questions to do with Brexit, and the great need and dependence that there is on that sector, so I am delighted that we can have this session.

I will go through one or two things very quickly. This is a live webcast. We will be taking a transcript. If the witnesses think that something is not correct, please let us know and we will make sure it is corrected if it is wrong. For those Members who did not declare any interests in the first session, if you have any, please do so. I am an honorary associate of the British Veterinary Association.

I will ask our Members to say who they want to answer the questions. It is not necessary for all three of our witnesses to answer all the questions, but please do if there is something important to say. I will ask our witnesses first of all to introduce themselves briefly so that our listeners understand exactly who we have here.

Mandisa Greene: I am the President of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

James Russell: I am the President of the British Veterinary Association, representing roughly 18,000 vets from all walks of the veterinary profession across the country. I am delighted to be here this morning and to be in a room with so many of our honorary associate members as well.

Professor Susan Dawson: I am currently Chair of the Veterinary Schools Council, which incorporates the nine veterinary schools in the UK. I am also the Dean of the vet school at the University of Liverpool, and I am a Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons council member and a previous chair of the education and primary qualifications sub-committee at the college.

Q11 The Chair: You are all busy people, and I thank you very much for being with us this morning.

As I said, this Committee has paid great attention to the veterinary input and the dependence particularly in the commercial and trade sector on EU citizens who are a part of our veterinary task force in this country and make our borders work. It is partly within that context that we have this evidence session today.

I will start off more generally and ask: what does the Trade and Cooperation Agreement require of veterinarians and their associated professions? Could you give a bird's eye summary of what the requirements are and where those pressure points are likely to come?

Mandisa Greene: Thank you for your introduction. It is very good to know that you have been very involved in the veterinary sector, so you will know a lot about it, I imagine. I want to clarify that the role of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons is to set, uphold and advance veterinary standards in order to enhance society through improved animal health and welfare.

During our membership of the European Union, there was a barrier-free trade in food and other animal products. Now that the transition period has ended, there is a requirement for export health certificates, as we heard in the previous session, to be signed by a vet to export food to the European Union and/or Northern Ireland. That represents a significant increase in need for veterinary certification, but there is a high degree of uncertainty at the moment about how much that is. Figures between 325% to 500% have been suggested.

We know that there are currently over 27,000 practising vets, and, of those, almost 8,000 have graduated from the EU—almost 30% of our workforce. We know that, in the last 10 years, UK registrations have continued to grow—that is vets who have qualified in the UK—and we have seen a decline in EU registrants. Significant to all of that is that 95% of the vets doing the work that will be required currently come from the EU as far as we know. That will certainly be a challenge going forward.

James Russell: As Mandisa has alluded to, we knew this was coming. We knew that, when the Withdrawal Agreement was concluded in October 2019, exporters would need export health certificates for animals and products of animal origin from GB to the EU single market, and that would include Northern Ireland because of the unique position that Northern Ireland now occupies.

I realise it is out of scope for today, but another pressure on our members is the additional steps required for pet travel and equine movements as well, and it is important to recognise them.

We found a great challenge in discussing with people through 2020 that the requirements would have been the same for those export health certificates whether the UK and EU had reached a free trade agreement or not. During that period, Defra made a best-guess estimate of the magnitude of increase in those export health certificates of 300%. We understand the maths that went into calculating that estimate, but we feel that it remains just that—an estimate. It fails to consider adequately the complexity of some of those certification requirements and the geographical placement of some of those being asked to complete them.

If I may give an example, we have been made aware of one company exporting to the continent that had moved from requiring zero health certificates to estimating that it would require 72,000 in a year. This highlights the issue that every transport of animals or product of animal origins from GB is now subject to those certificates.

We always recognised that any free trade agreement between the UK and the EU was going to manage friction and was not able to seek to reduce it, but we hoped that in some way the TCA would make that process easier, less bureaucratic, and reduce the level of checks required. Despite things like the groupage export facilitation scheme, which aims to facilitate trade where a stable supply chain exists, we are seeing real challenges with interpreting and actioning the export health certificates in a way that is acceptable to the importing countries.

We would say that the SPS chapter in the trade agreement is very thin and essentially restates what already exists at OIE and WTO level. There is some regionalisation of disease risks; Scotland is still recognised as being officially TB-free in the eyes of the EU, but that is just good faith interpretation of the WTO SPS agreements.

We welcome the language on AMR and welfare and sustainability. One really important point to raise is that the TCA states that parties recognise that animals are sentient beings. This is not yet legally true in the UK and should be rectified in legislation as a matter of urgency, as, indeed, was a commitment of the Government in their manifesto.

We welcome that the Trade Specialised Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures will exist where the two sides can meet to discuss those issues and hopefully simplify things as much as they can within the deal.

We recognise the role and skills of our Chief Veterinary Officers and their teams, but we would implore that the use of appropriate additional veterinary expertise is maximised in that process to make sure that animal health, animal welfare, and public health are upheld while using our workforce efficiently and effectively. It is important to state that we have not been involved in that process.

The Chair: That is very useful, James. Do we know who is on that grouping yet? Have people been named?

James Russell: If that is a matter of public record, Chair, I am afraid it is not in my mind. I can follow it up.

The Chair: It is a good point that it is not just commercial merchandise; it is around pets as well, which I remember discussing with Michael Gove when he was Defra Minister in front of this Committee. Susan?

Professor Susan Dawson: I will focus on veterinary education and what that means here because of the increase in required capacity of veterinary surgeons. The UK veterinary schools have seen the increased requirement for quite some time and have taken measures to try to increase the number of veterinary graduates we have from the UK. That has been done in different ways. We have new veterinary schools, for example, at the University of Surrey and Harper and Keele, who took their first intake in 2020.

We have agreements with one vet school having part of the programme completed at another university such as the University of Aberystwyth, with the clinical placements and clinical teaching taking place at the Royal Veterinary College in London. We have increases in the number of weeks in the year that are used. Nottingham has increased its cohorts to two cohorts of veterinary undergraduates. It has intakes twice a year so that it can keep on teaching veterinary graduates throughout the whole year and not have periods of time where facilities and resources are not being used. Many or most of the other schools have also taken measures to increase their graduating vets.

One of the changes in the Agreement is on the mutual recognition of primary qualifications. We have had to look at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons education level and council level in how we ensure that vets from elsewhere in the EU can still become members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in the UK and we can assure that the standards of their veterinary education are similar and appropriate for registration as a vet in the UK.

The college has been working on that for several years now and has an interim position where we will look at the European body approval or accreditation at the time of graduation as appropriate for a vet to become a member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. We have put many measures in place to try to increase the overall veterinary capacity, but there is still work to be done in making sure that that is sustainable and able to approach the increasing needs because of that Agreement.

The Chair: Could I just get a clarification? It is an obvious question going on from that in terms of recognition of qualifications. Are EU-qualified vets in the UK now still seen as being qualified?

Professor Susan Dawson: It depends on which veterinary school they have graduated from. If the veterinary school has approval or accreditation from EAEVE—the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education—at the time that they graduate, they will be able to become members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons as long as they also have an appropriate English language qualification.

The Chair: That is presumably the majority of them who are here at the moment.

Professor Susan Dawson: Yes. Mandisa can maybe help me with the figures, but something like 85% of the EU vets who have come on to the register in recent years would be covered by that arrangement, so it is the majority.

The Chair: Thank you.

Q12 **Baroness Jolly:** Will vet availability be a constraint on the operation of the new arrangements in the UK? If so, what is the extent of the shortfall, and what are its causes? Is the issue more pressing in some areas of the UK than others?

Mandisa Greene: Yes. Vet availability will be a constraint because we currently estimate that we have a 12% to 15% shortage of vets in the UK. We are not clear to what extent that will impact the operation of the new arrangements. We are in regular contact with Defra and the Food Standards Agency, the Animal and Plant Health Agency, and the Chief Veterinary Officers, who are all watching the situation closely. As we already know that we have a deficit and there is quite likely to be more requirement for vet capacity, we understand there is still considerable uncertainty, but we know that there is likely to be some increased requirement that we may not be able to fill.

The UK is heavily reliant on EU-qualified vets. Upwards of 50% of the vets who register in the UK—around 1,000 a year—in recent years have qualified in the EU. They make up about a third of the vets in the register. Approximately 95% of those vets work in the public health industry and are qualified in the EU. The UK has not needed to be self-sufficient in veterinary surgeons due to free movement and the mutual recognition of professional qualifications directive. This may now have changed. Relatively low pay and the nature of public health work has resulted in it being less popular than other areas of veterinary practice for UK graduates. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons must be assured of the standards of vets who register in the UK.

With the end of the mutual recognition agreement and free movement, and the current COVID crisis, we expect fewer EU vets to register in the coming months and years. The decade-long growth of EU registrations flatlined after the referendum and was down by approximately 50% in 2020.

As an interim measure, as Susan described before, the RCVS will continue to recognise degrees of vets who qualified from schools approved or accredited by EAEVE. That includes approximately 85% of those who could have registered before. Those without the recognised degrees can sit our statutory exam and can register that way. We are investigating alternatives for the future such as direct accreditation of European vet schools or forming mutual recognition agreements with EU Member States, as we have done already with Ireland.

EAEVE also approves and accredits schools outside the EU such as Turkey and Japan. Graduates of those schools are now able to register here.

Under EU legislation, we are not allowed to enforce minimum standards of English for EU graduates. As long as we did not have serious or concrete doubts about their ability to communicate in English, they could register, but now we cannot discriminate between EU and non-EU vets. The level of English required is IELTS level 7 or the Occupational English Test, which is OET level B, which is the same as other professions such as doctors or dentists.

We know that there are other barriers to living and working in the UK, which now requires a visa. Vets have been added to the shortage

occupation list, but it is still an administrative barrier that may discourage some.

As a regulator, we are responsible for upholding standards and ensuring animal health and welfare and public health. We do not think it is appropriate to lower those standards in order to address workforce concerns.

The Chair: We will come on to some of those issues in future questions, so we must remember not to get too far ahead of ourselves at the moment. Carry on please.

Baroness Jolly: Susan?

Professor Susan Dawson: I do not think I have a huge amount to add to what Mandisa has described. In the short term, the veterinary schools are able to continue with face-to-face teaching during the COVID pandemic, which has given us the opportunity to ensure that we graduate a year of veterinary surgeons in 2021, fingers crossed, with a strong wind behind us. As a short-term measure, we are making sure that we do everything we can to get the UK graduates through in a timely manner.

Baroness Jolly: James, from the BVA?

James Russell: Mandisa and Susan have outlined quite forcefully where we are in terms of provision of veterinary capacity within the UK. I would like to come at this slightly from the other angle of what the demand is on our time and how we are able to meet it, and if that provides any constraints. We are slightly concerned to hear the mood music coming through from one or two sources saying there has not been a challenge put in place by veterinary constraints at the moment.

As to where we are with that, I think we would be really worried if that were the case at this stage. We have remained in close contact with the French embassy through the past few months. Certainly, by the first few days of January, they were talking to us about trade between GB and France being about 30% of its usual amount, and that, still, it is running at something like 60% of its amount with two-thirds of lorries, as we heard in the earlier session, travelling across empty. There is a way to go before we even understand on the day-to-day exports where we are at on capacity, but there is also the nature of some of those exports.

One that was brought to our attention quite early on was fresh cream. That is a hugely high-value commodity and it helps to support the farm-gate price paid for milk to UK dairy farmers. By the very nature of it, it is a very short shelf-life product. That coupled with very short export windows does not mean that, effectively, X number of health certificates means X number of vets. We need to have a large enough team of vets who can be engaged in that work and in the right place in the country to have people 24 hours a day to satisfy those requirements as and when they arise. It is much more complex than the simple sum might suggest.

When you put that alongside the 24-hour pre-notification on TRACES UK, it can mean that in some cases we are pre-notifying a product that does not exist yet when the windows are that tight.

We are seeing what we would think of as being this glide path at the moment towards normal levels of export across the short straits, but, in my mind, when I am thinking about veterinary capacity in the short term, I am thinking about a couple of steps coming in to play as well with that. The first significant step will be when veterinary certification is required to Northern Ireland from 1 April. We heard in the earlier session producers asking for some sort of extension to the current arrangements that gives some leeway to large producers. Smaller producers are already subject to those checks. We are concerned that the direction of conversation there prevents people from taking the steps that they need to make to prepare for what is likely to be an increased demand for veterinary capacity on 1 April.

We have the import controls coming in in July. All of this is taking place in and around the Northern Ireland Protocol too as those aspects of trade are brought in. The alignment of Northern Ireland and EU single market rules extends to and includes sanitary rules on veterinary controls. That has meant that OVs have had to be in place in Northern Ireland ports from 1 January to perform those checks. Any movements from Northern Ireland to GB that may return to Northern Ireland or move on into the EU are subject to those support health attestations, which also require veterinary involvement.

We welcome the movement assistance scheme that has been put in place to subsidise some of those EHC costs of goods moving from GB to Northern Ireland, but it does not cover those support health attestations.

As a result of all those factors, it is very hard for us to answer the question simply of whether veterinary capacity is a constraint, because we just do not know what is coming and how exporters' behaviour will respond to those changes and requirements over the coming months.

Q13 **Baroness McIntosh of Pickering:** First, welcome. You very properly set out what the demands are to make sure that the agri-food industry requirements under the new regime post Brexit are met. I will ask you about specific short-term measures, and I have two particularly in mind, although you may have others as well. One is the role of the newly recruited certification support officer, who, I understand, does not really have a great deal of training. What will their role be, and will an official veterinary surgeon still be required to sign the certificate off?

In a December round table, we heard that it may be the case that food production sites could be accredited to produce their own health certificates, reducing the need for veterinary input. Given what we have heard from you this morning, would that be a wise move?

James Russell: We recognise the hugely important role that vets have played historically in certifying the safety of the food produced in the

United Kingdom and exported from it. I think we would be very keen to promote the importance of that role.

We welcomed the role of the certification support officer when it was introduced. What remains to be clarified is how those certification support officers can work alongside their supervising OV's to provide the documentation, attestations and so on, which ultimately enable the OV to sign off on the export health certificate at the end of the day, not just in a way that they are satisfied with, and that Mandisa at the Royal College is satisfied fulfils our professional duties, but so that the European Union or the importing country is satisfied with the veracity of the document that they have in front of them. The challenge at the moment is the very rigid definition. An EHC has to be signed off by an Official Veterinarian, and, behind that, there is some very consignment-specific evidence to support the food safety and traceability of the food in that consignment. So that is where we are with certification support officers.

As to other short-term measures, we know that there has been a proposal to put in place—and, indeed, it has been put in place—a surge capacity by the vets at the Animal and Plant Health Agency and the Food Standards Agency. We welcome that, but it is always going to be a little bit of a “robbing Peter to pay Paul” scenario.

As a country, at the moment we are in a situation where we are facing an unusually severe avian influenza incursion. The vets at APHA are quite rightly and quite necessarily engaged in their day-to-day roles on the very front line of maintaining the surveillance network across the country for avian influenza but also other diseases of which we know and are quite rightly nervous at the moment. African swine fever is the most obvious one at the moment that we know is on mainland Europe and could be quite challenging for us if it were to land on our shores.

In addition to that surge capacity, the APHA has contracted new locums who can help to meet that demand. Those people are being sent out as and when needed into practice. They have also been able to support us as private OV's in increasing our numbers from around 600 in early 2019 to more like 1,200 now. That is welcome, and the funded training to enable that to happen is really welcome as well.

I reiterate the point that those people are not sitting around with a pen and clipboard wondering what to do with their days. They are already engaged in the work of veterinary surgeons. That is against a backdrop where the Major Employers Group, in round numbers, probably employs 40% to 50% of vets working in the United Kingdom, or slightly less than that. They were looking at about a 12% vacancy rate in their employ. We recognise that we are asking them to try to draw on greater reserves from a profession that is currently not even able to fulfil all the vacancies that we know exist within the country. Further than that, there are the conversations we have had about the freedom of movement of people and the reliance that we have had on people coming into the country to help us fulfil those needs.

Baroness McIntosh of Pickering: Is there any chance at all of self-accreditation of the food production sites? Is that a no-no?

James Russell: Through things like the groupage export facilitation scheme, we are seeing the ability to forward certify stable supply chains and to understand that there may not be a requirement to sign off every egg or bottle of milk that goes into a composite product where that supply chain is stable and where we are confident of the food safety of the supply chain behind it. To go any further than that into self-certification is something that, as I say, we have absolutely no indication that any importing country would be keen to accept at the moment.

Mandisa Greene: James covered it very well. I want to give an example, because you asked about certification support officers. To my understanding, for example, if we have lots of packages of butter that need to be exported, previously we would have expected our OV's to be able to count all of them and do large bulk items one by one. We now have certification support officers who can do products like that. They are able to evidence gather for our certification officers, excluding anything that is germ plasm or germinal products. They will be able to take on some of the heavy lifting and do some of that work, providing the evidence for our certification officers.

We also have food competent certifying officers, who enable our Official Veterinarians to make use of supporting attestations from government-designated food competent certifying officers. That is really just to clarify. Hopefully, that gives some examples of what they do.

Professor Susan Dawson: We have a problem with not enough veterinary capacity, but we also have a problem that not as many vets choose the agri-food industry as other areas of their profession. I wonder if consideration could be given to some incentives to encourage new graduates—young vets—into the agri-food industry. We are in a position where our veterinary graduates now graduate with a debt; £100,000 is not out of order. It is a long course, and it is a significant input. They do not have the time and the holidays to work to try to achieve an income by other means.

If any arrangements could be made around debt forgiveness for a period of time while they work in the agri-food industry, I wonder if that would encourage some of our new, younger graduates in the profession to join that particular part of the industry.

Baroness McIntosh of Pickering: Thank you very much indeed for that, and I will hand over to the Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Lady McIntosh. Let us move on to longer-term solutions and Lord Giddens. I cannot hear you.

Q14 **Lord Giddens:** I was just in the process of saying thanks very much for your answers so far, which I found very fluent, interesting and informative.

Can I ask you to think more longer term and consider the role of government? If you think further ahead, what can the Government do to increase the number of UK-trained vets working in the agri-food industry, and, just as important, persuade them to stay here? Speaking as someone who works in universities, would the best thing be to expand high-profile courses such as those at the royal college and other institutions? What kinds of longer-term strategies would you like to pick out for the Committee?

Professor Susan Dawson: We do not have a cap on veterinary student numbers at the moment. Each school can take as many veterinary students as it wishes and it can cope with in its facilities, but we are in the lucky position that many young people—or people of any age—are still keen to join the veterinary profession. We get a lot of applications, and applications to veterinary schools look as if they have gone up again this year, which is a good position to be in.

On funding for veterinary education, the students contribute £9,250 annually with their fees, but we also get a payment for a high-cost course through band A funding from the Office for Students. That diminishes because that is a finite pot of money. The more people you take out of that pot, the smaller the amount per head. Therefore, that can be a diminishing resource to universities and veterinary schools at the moment. We would like to encourage the Government to consider keeping the payment per head per veterinary student at the same level so that we can provide education across all the standards that we need to and be allowed to increase our veterinary student numbers without that impacting on our payments and our income per head of vet student.

Lord Giddens: Do you have a significant number of overseas students in your courses? In other words, do they go back to the countries of their origin? A lot of British universities simply treat overseas students as cash cows, as it were, and then they all depart mostly back to where they come from, so they would not provide longer-term support for the veterinary industry.

Professor Susan Dawson: Some veterinary schools have a higher number of international students than others. That probably relates to whether they have North American accreditation for their veterinary school, which would allow their graduates to work in North America. The majority of those graduates will go back to their own country or other countries to work longer term.

The decision made by the different universities and veterinary schools has probably been around the income associated with the different groups of students, and the potential problem I outlined with the per head income for a home student being on a declining pathway rather than an increasing pathway at the same rate as the expenditure pathway.

There is not a need to fill our places with international students, because we do not have the numbers of people in the UK who wish to go to veterinary school. Many of the applicants we get are appropriately

academically qualified and experienced, and so would make good veterinary surgeons.

It comes round to the capacity that each veterinary school has for students. If the funding was appropriate, some international places could be given to home students. I should say at this point—it is not my area of expertise—that the funding in Scotland is different from the funding—

Lord Giddens: I assumed so. Mandisa?

Mandisa Greene: In terms of longer-term solutions, we have identified that there is a need to incentivise vets who are already living and registered in the UK to urgently take up this public health work. It is really important, but we know it is not well paid, and vets do not regard it as being of as high a standard as some other parts of their career. It really should become more substantial in terms of a wide range of work that individual vets or veterinary practices could undertake and could contribute to a flexible basis of a portfolio of a vet or vet practice. We need to ensure that, once we use incentives to encourage vets to do that work, those incentives must remain as vets' careers and their lives develop. It is really important that, once we get vets in, we encourage them to remain in that sector.

Susan already touched on the need for funding for education. As to retention, I know the RCVS and the BVA have partnered to create a Vet Futures initiative that has led to numerous initiatives to boost veterinary retention. We are certainly looking at that and, hopefully, that will help vets in all sectors of their professions.

Lord Giddens: James?

James Russell: I think a lot of my points have been covered, but, if I may just add to some of those, Susan makes some very important points about the funding of veterinary universities and veterinary students. Education of young people who wish to become vets, and broadening and widening the diversity of the pool of people from which we are able to choose coming into the profession, is very important to us at the British Veterinary Association. For that reason, as well as many others, we welcome the initiative between the Royal Veterinary College and Aberystwyth University as an opportunity to try to draw people from that slightly underrepresented west Walian community in a way that tries to bind their roots to that area of the country. Providing a greater veterinary resilience within Wales is something that we welcome and we would like to see where else that might be facilitated and be helpful around the country.

The other part where we can play our role in this is in retention of vets within the profession. Mandisa has alluded to the Vet Futures initiative, and we are very active and proud to be a part of that. We are also trying to work at the moment to develop a good workplace ethos in all our veterinary workplaces. That will be really important in keeping people in

the profession and keeping those roles filled that I have talked about where we have that capacity gap.

We must recognise that, at the moment, there is a paucity of people coming through our system who, when they look out into the world of work, whether or not it is a good workplace, are looking at it thinking, "What I would really like to do is to go and work in public health and in export certification work". We have to find a way—and we would implore government to be involved in this as well—to make that a more desirable environment to work in and a more desirable place to be at work.

Lord Giddens: Thank you so much. I found that really useful.

The Chair: Lord Cameron, you wanted to come in on a supplementary question.

Q15 **Lord Cameron of Dillington:** It is a question for James. I see a lot of this work in future being done by food competent certifying officers, because you do not really need five years' training to see whether a carton of cream that is yet to exist is saleable, according to your example, James, or, for that matter, to see whether a crate of nephrops is saleable. These officers are employed by local authorities, are they not? What liaison is there between you, the BVA, and the local authorities which are ultimately responsible for that—are they not? You are shaking your head saying that they are not responsible.

James Russell: There is a difference in different areas of the country. Certainly, a lot of this work is done through private relationships between exporting producers and veterinary providers of Official Veterinarians.

In response to your point on whether one requires that level of training—and let us remember that this is not just people who have undertaken five years' veterinary training; it is people who have undertaken postgraduate qualifications to enable them to be Official Veterinarians as well—these are highly skilled people. One of the reasons why they are there is because the validity and veracity of the signature and the stamp that goes alongside it on those certificates is what is required by our trading partners. It is not just a new thing that has come up with the EU but has been the situation worldwide for product of animal origin exports for some time.

The drift has been for fewer members of the general veterinary population, if I can put it that way, to be involved in this on a day-to-day basis—or a week-by-week basis at least, let us say—and for that role to have become more specialised and more focused on individuals for whom that is a big part of their job. That is a double-edged sword because it has made those people incredibly expert in what they do, but, as we see right now, it has reduced the resilience of the profession to fulfil the growing need again at this time.

The Chair: Thank you, James.

We move on to our last question from Lord Young, who, I must say, has

been a great champion of the veterinary profession, particularly on the question he is going to ask.

Q16 Lord Young of Norwood Green: I have found the contributions so far really interesting and they have given me some good background knowledge.

To me, the challenge represents an opportunity. It is a bit like fruit and veg—we want to grow our own. I declare my interest. I am an apprenticeship ambassador. I am interested whether the vocational training routes and apprenticeship training routes, and the role of veterinary nurses, can make a contribution to the problems that we currently have.

One of the problems that I have seen identified is public health vets' pay. It seems to me that that is something the Government could be involved in. Then there is the question of training. In other circumstances where we have a shortage, for instance nursing, bursaries are now given to mitigate the high costs—the £9,200.

The question that I want to put to all of you, but Mandisa first, is: do you think you are doing enough to encourage young people to go through the vocational training routes and start with an apprenticeship? I know there is a foundation degree. One of the contributors made that point. I think James talked about broadening diversity. Do you think currently you are making a contribution to encouraging that vocational route, and broadening diversity, which would make a very positive contribution to the shortfall in veterinary capacity that you described?

Mandisa Greene: At the moment, the standards that we require from vet schools are being redrafted so that they are more output-focused or outcome-focused. We are quite sure that we are doing as much as we can to encourage diversity. We are aware that the length and nature of the veterinary degree means that it is not suitable for apprenticeship schemes per se. We have quite a lot of practical aspects of our course. You will know that vet students have to do work experience before coming to vet school, and, while in vet school, they will have quite a lot of practical experience. They are not short of practical experience.

In terms of an apprenticeship, it becomes a bit difficult if we have, for example, a student being paid as an apprentice of an equine practice and having to be competent in all areas. They then have to go to a small animal practice and a farm animal practice to see pigs, exotics and so on, while being paid by an equine practice, which makes it very difficult to get that rounded qualification.

Veterinary nurses and other paraprofessionals can qualify via an apprenticeship route. We note that that is currently happening. However, veterinary nurses and other paraprofessionals cannot certify. EU regulations on importation of animal products require certification to be completed by a veterinary surgeon, but they can be CSOs.

Professor Susan Dawson: We have moved quite a long way to make sure that vets only do the jobs that vets have to do, and we have the

vet-led team. We are providing the opportunity for others to be involved in that vet-lead team and take on jobs previously done by veterinary surgeons but, actually, can be done very well by others in the team.

Specifically focusing on the veterinary undergraduate degree, there are difficulties in making that an apprenticeship degree, although some schools are now looking at postgraduate qualifications as an apprenticeship around the veterinary profession. For the primary undergraduate degree, there are different issues or difficulties. One is the complexity and fullness of the timetable. Our veterinary undergraduates have to complete their degree, which is a longer course than other undergraduates; they spend more of the year at university having direct teaching opportunities. In addition to that, over the five-year programme, there is a requirement by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons that they have to spend 38 weeks on extra-mural studies. There is not a [Inaudible.] in your funding apprenticeship business as part of the primary veterinary degree.

The other point that Mandisa touched on was the complexity of the degree and the standards. At the moment, in the UK, graduates from a veterinary degree have to have omnipotential. We do not have limited licensure where a veterinary surgeon can graduate only doing part of the job of a veterinary surgeon. That would be the same globally. James made the point that, in terms of certification, it has to be the signature of a veterinary surgeon. That is a requirement by our colleagues elsewhere and comes back to the global standards. We have to meet the global standards of veterinary surgeons in the UK as well.

James Russell: I support what has been said by others but highlight that it is the standards that we are qualified to, which, coming back to where we are with export health certificates, is what allows that OV signature to be respected worldwide when it comes to our animals and our products of animal origin. There is very little scope for altering the veterinary curriculum in that way.

The postgraduate apprenticeship that Nottingham vet school is currently looking at has already been mentioned. It is important to say that, whatever the pros and cons of that apprenticeship, that will benefit people who have already graduated as vets. It will not increase the capacity or the number of vets within the system.

Where we would see more opportunities, as Susan has alluded to, is in that agri-food space, with the paraprofessionals working as part of the vet-led team to help support those roles that can rightly be done by other well-regulated, well-supported, qualified paraprofessionals. We can see benefits towards an apprenticeship approach in that space.

Lord Young of Norwood Green: Why can we not create an apprenticeship route for a veterinary nurse to qualify? We are talking about attracting young people into the profession. You made an interesting point. You want to make the public health part of it more attractive. Somebody suggested that it would be part of a flexible

portfolio in veterinary health practice. If you had veterinary nurses who saw this as a potential route through, why are you not encouraging that?

The Chair: Could we have some quick answers on that, briefly?

Mandisa Greene: If veterinary nurses want to train as veterinary surgeons, they can do an accelerated course. That already exists. As an apprenticeship route, that is challenging for the reasons that have been outlined previously, but veterinary nurses can have an accelerated qualification to become a veterinary surgeon if they wish.

James Russell: Veterinary nurses are a profession in and of their own right, with their own bespoke skill set. They are very much not mini-vets whom we could coach up with minimal input to get over the line or anything along that route. The veterinary degree course is tough—tough in terms of the academic requirements of it and the time that one commits to it, both in university, as Susan has alluded to, and then out in practice doing extra-mural studies as well. I find it very hard to see how the capacity around that could be found that could be delivered through an apprenticeship model.

Lord Young of Norwood Green: All I could say in response—and I do not think we have the time to answer it now—is that, in the teaching and nursing profession, you can progress from being a teaching assistant and a nursing assistant through a vocational route. I must admit I am disappointed that there does not seem to be the same enthusiasm in examining how it could be done as there is in why it cannot be done. I will leave you with that thought.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Lord Young. We are pretty well out of time.

Duke of Montrose, you wanted to come in on a question. Was there something quickly you wanted to ask one of our witnesses in particular?

The Duke of Montrose: It was mentioned just at the tail end of Mandisa's contribution about germ plasm. Does that affect the import and export of cattle semen and that sort of thing?

Mandisa Greene: The Duke of Montrose has stumped me. I do not know the answer, but I can get back to you with that information. I am sorry.

The Chair: That is a very appropriate response. Mandisa, James, and Susan, thank you very much indeed for your evidence this morning. I am sure as a committee and its successor committee after March we will keep very close to you and the issues that we have gone through today. Thank you very much indeed for your evidence, for being with us for a quite long time this morning, and I now formally end this public meeting.