Thank you Dr Parker for your kind introduction and for reading my citation. It goes without saying that I am proud and honored to receive this notable award. I thank the AVA, the individual who nominated me, the Awards Committee, and the AVA Board for considering me worthy to receive this most prestigious prize.

As you know, the Gilruth Prize has a long history, being first awarded in 1953 – the year before I was born. Many influential and meritorious Australian Veterinarians have received this award in the last 65 years – and I am deeply moved to find myself amongst this Pantheon of the Profession.

On hearing that I was to receive this award, and moreover was expected to say something, I looked up the life story of John Anderson Gilruth, for whom this award is named – and I will start my short talk by sharing it with you here.

In brief, John Gilruth was born in 1871 near Arbroath in Scotland. He studied Veterinary Medicine in Glasgow and, after passing the exams of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (with many distinctions), in 1893, he took up a post as a government veterinarian in New Zealand at the tender age of 22. Three years later, he was sent to the Institute Pasteur in Paris to learn bacteriology, and soon thereafter, he was appointed as Chief Veterinary Officer of New Zealand.

In 1908, after 15 eventful years in New Zealand, Gilruth moved to the University of Melbourne as the Foundation Chair in Veterinary Pathology, and subsequently he became Dean of the Melbourne Veterinary Faculty. In 1912, he moved to become the Administrator of the Northern Territory, and then spent a long period as an influential private consultant. In 1933, the CSIRO appointed him as the Chief of the new Division of Animal Health. He retired 2 years later at the age of 64, and he passed away when he was 66. It was a relatively short life, but a full one, where he made many significant contributions to Veterinary Science in Australia and New Zealand.

Well, now something about me. I found some minor but interesting parallels with Gilruth in my own story:

1. I was delighted to find that I have a direct ancestor on my mother’s side who, like Gilruth, was born near Arbroath. She and her husband migrated to Australia during the 1850’s gold rush. One of their descendants, my Mum, was a Sydney girl and a dinky-di Aussie. She met my English Dad during the war, and eventually I was born in England.

2. Like Gilruth, I too received my Veterinary Degree in the UK.
3. I also moved to New Zealand, where I worked at the Veterinary Faculty at Massey University.
4. Whilst in New Zealand I started to evolve into a Veterinary Bacteriologist (like Gilruth).
5. I too moved to Australia, and eventually I became a Professor of Veterinary Microbiology and Dean of the School of Veterinary and Life Sciences at Murdoch University.

Even if not nearly as illustrious as Gilruth’s career, mine has been a satisfying journey.

I officially retired last year after 31 years at Murdoch, but, perhaps mindful of Gilruth’s early demise following retirement, I have now moved to City University of Hong Kong where I am a Chair Professor and the Head of the Department of Infectious Diseases and Public Health in the new College of Veterinary and Life Sciences.

In terms of personal acknowledgements, the people who deserve my greatest thanks are my family members - for their support and understanding whilst I worked slowly but steadily over the years. They graciously put up with a lot, and I thank them for that.

I was recruited to Murdoch University by Prof John Howell, the Dean of the Veterinary School (he too later received the Gilruth prize). He was a patient and good-humoured man whom I much admired.

I used to say that I never had an academic mentor and that I had to make my own way – but in later years, I have come to realise that I did receive a lot of mentoring at Murdoch University. It was mentoring by example, and the “nudge” sort of mentoring that you don’t even notice. When I was a young man in the then Department of Veterinary Biology there was a friendly and collegiate atmosphere. We didn’t have personal computers, emails or I-phones to distract us, and we enjoyed our communal tea breaks and discussions instead. The cohort of wise senior academics shielded the newbies like me from too much administration, and we were given the “head space” and opportunity to develop as academics in our own way. The “nudges” included things such as giving praise for successes, acknowledging contributions made, making sure that we all got our fair share of resources, that young staff were sheltered from departmental administrative or financial problems, and that we were not overloaded with “non-core” matters. I seemed to thrive under that benign regimen.

Despite times having changed, I have tried to follow these same approaches as much as possible during the later period of my career, after I surprised myself by becoming the one in charge (a sort of last man standing at Murdoch). I will reiterate a few simple but important academic leadership steps that I was taught over the years: try be a good role model (i.e. lead by example); be clear about what needs to be done, and who does what; don’t micromanage; build teams with complementary skills; do your due diligence, and recruit staff who have potential; give them room to develop and excel; support them (morally and with resources); be
prepared to cover their backs. Also – don’t necessarily expect a lot of thanks: your reward is in seeing your colleagues succeed.

Like Gilruth, I have published a lot, but it is important to acknowledge that most of those publications have been with research students and colleagues. I have been blessed with good collaborators and a steady stream of bright, enthusiastic, and hardworking PhD students. Many have gone on to become leading academics, research scientists and clinical veterinarians around the world.

During my 31 years at Murdoch University, the Veterinary School went from being the new “upstart” School in Australia, to becoming a well-respected mature School with an international reputation for producing high quality veterinarians with excellent “hands on” skills. During my years there, I saw the launch of the “new” Veterinary Schools at Charles Sturt University, James Cook University and the University of Adelaide. Each time that a new one was announced we thought that the sky would fall in, and that we would be swamped with veterinarians in Australia. Fortunately, it hasn’t quite worked out that way, and the new Schools have brought new approaches and perspectives. The Profession in Australia is more diverse and stronger for having them here.

Now we are seeing another wave of evolution, with new Veterinary Schools being set up in Asia, and some established Schools in the region seeking to become accredited through the Australasian Veterinary Board’s Council (AVBC). In the short term, these developments could be seen as a threat by the Australasian Schools, who rely on recruiting international fee-paying veterinary students to support their finances. There is a fear that the supply of students might dry up.

As someone who now works in a new Asian School, at City University of Hong Kong, I prefer a different interpretation – I see these developments as being very positive. The AVBC through VSAAC now has an opportunity to be extremely influential in helping to raise standards and to steer the development of high quality veterinary training throughout the Asia-Pacific region. This ultimately will lead to improved veterinary services, and to enhanced animal health and welfare throughout the region. Again, I must emphasize that the AVBC standards will have to be met and that the quality of the training must be at least as high as in Australia and New Zealand before the new Schools can become accredited.

The smartest move for the Australasian Schools would be to actively collaborate and co-operation with the new and improving Schools in Asia, and to help them to become accredited: this will improve the Australasian Schools’ access to research students, research opportunities and research funds, and also to potential veterinary students who do have both the financial resources and a preference to be trained in accredited Schools outside their own countries.
Having said that, many of the veterinary students now being trained in the new School in Hong Kong could not afford the costs of being trained overseas, and so would not have had the opportunity to become veterinarians. Now, once qualified, they will be able to contribute to development of quality veterinary services in the region. The involvement of VSAAC and the AVBC will help to ensure that standards are high, and that Australia and New Zealand have a positive guiding influence on that development.

I think that this can only be interpreted as a good thing for our Profession.

My time is up, and so I thank you once again for this marvellous award, and for the opportunity to speak with you here in Brisbane.