



LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 4

Veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

Report 58

June 2024

4



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Portfolio Committee No. 4 - Regional NSW

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Veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

"June 2024"

Chair: Hon Mark Banasiak MLC



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Terms of reference

1. That Portfolio Committee 4 – Regional NSW inquire into and report on the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales, and in particular:
 - (a) the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry and pathology
 - (b) the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates
 - (c) the burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession
 - (d) the role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses
 - (e) the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians
 - (f) the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services
 - (g) the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians
 - (h) the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales
 - (i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations
 - (j) the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others
 - (k) current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations
 - (l) strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practising veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales
 - (m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care
 - (n) any other related matter.

The terms of reference for the inquiry were self-referred by the committee on 9 June 2023.¹

¹ *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 20 June 2023, pp 187-188.

Committee details

Committee members

Hon Mark Banasiak MLC	Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party	<i>Chair</i>
Hon Emma Hurst MLC	Animal Justice Party	<i>Deputy Chair</i>
Ms Abigail Boyd MLC*	The Greens	
Hon Greg Donnelly MLC	Australian Labor Party	
Hon Aileen MacDonald MLC**	Liberal Party	
Hon Sarah Mitchell MLC	The Nationals	
Hon Cameron Murphy MLC	Australian Labor Party	
Hon Peter Primrose MLC	Australian Labor Party	

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* Ms Abigail Boyd MLC was a participating member from 9 June 2023 for the duration of the inquiry.

** The Hon Aileen MacDonald MLC replaced the Hon Taylor Martin MLC as a substantive member of the committee from 8 May 2024.

Secretariat

Sarah Newlands, Principal Council Officer

Gareth Perkins, Council Officer

Kate Mihaljek, Director

Chair's foreword

During this year-long inquiry the committee heard from an array of stakeholders, including a substantial proportion of the veterinarians practising in New South Wales. We learned that a complex combination of factors, including the regulatory framework, market forces and community expectations, have created a 'perfect storm' for this sector which has led to workforce shortages and many other challenges. The committee has made over 30 recommendations to help address these concerns.

Many veterinarians shared stories of challenges in their workplace, including difficulties recruiting and retaining team members, providing 'gold standard' care to animals, and dealing with long workdays and on call duties. These concerns, plus issues such as increasing client demands and low wages, has created a situation where a significant proportion of veterinarians are leaving the profession or working shorter hours.

The committee found that the current regulatory framework is likely to be contributing to some of these stressors as it places an obligation for vets to provide treatment for any animal placed into their care. In particular, veterinarians are obliged to treat injured wildlife and lost, stray and homeless animals. Often, this occurs with very little or no recompense for their services. This practice is not sustainable. To address this issue, we have recommended that the NSW Government provide dedicated ongoing funding for the provision of veterinary services to wildlife. We have also made recommendations to help ensure local government authorities collect stray animals from licensed veterinary clinics.

Additionally, the committee found that the regulatory framework may not be sufficiently flexible to allow the provision of care via mobile veterinary clinics and telehealth. The committee believes that when used appropriately, these services could help alleviate some of the challenges faced by the veterinary workforce and pet owners. We have therefore recommended that the government prioritise a review of the regulatory framework.

The committee was very concerned to learn of the poor mental health and burnout experienced by veterinarians. We have recommended that the NSW Government and the Australian Veterinary Association work together to develop mental health programs to support this sector of the workforce.

We found that many of these issues are compounded for veterinarians and veterinary practices outside the major cities, where finding childcare and housing is also difficult. These challenges, plus a dwindling supply of younger veterinarians wanting to work with large animals, make it extremely difficult to recruit veterinarians in rural and regional areas. The committee recommended the NSW Government provide financial incentives to encourage veterinarians to work in large animal practice in regional areas.

The committee has recommended that veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians be brought into a regulatory framework, similar to that in place in Western Australia. This would benefit these members of the vet team by introducing professional standards, increase their contribution to veterinary care and potentially reduce the workload of veterinarians.

The universities that are responsible for providing veterinary graduates are facing their own obstacles, including recruiting academic staff and the high cost of delivery of veterinary courses. The committee calls on the NSW Government to advocate to the Australian Government for more funding for universities to assist with the cost of delivering veterinary degrees.

Understandably, the cost of veterinary care was seen as a significant barrier to accessing services. The committee heard of pet owners who were unable to afford even basic care, such as vaccinations, for their pets. The committee has therefore recommended that the NSW Government explore options of making veterinary care more accessible for low-income earners, pensioners and animal rescue groups. We have also made recommendations to educate pet owners about the cost of veterinary care.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this inquiry, including the organisations that we visited, the University of Sydney, Charles Sturt University, Inverell Veterinary Clinic and Gowrie Veterinary Clinic.

I also thank my fellow committee members for the way in which they have engaged with the issues throughout the inquiry.

Hon Mark Banasiak MLC
Committee Chair

Findings

- Finding 1** **10**
That due to a range of factors, including the pressures of consumer demands and changing workforce composition, the number of practising veterinarians and hours worked is insufficient to meet the needs of the community.
- Finding 2** **27**
That there was a conflict in the evidence: the shortage of vets leads to an inability to see and treat all animals, and at the same time there was concern over lay people doing work traditionally completed by vets such as cattle pregnancy tests and dental check-ups on horses. This conflict remained unresolved.
- Finding 3** **28**
That veterinarians provide a significant public good by providing services to injured wildlife, and stray, lost and homeless animals that is not currently appropriately recompensed by the NSW Government.
- Finding 4** **30**
That the provision of after-hours care has a significant impact on veterinarians' health and wellbeing.
- Finding 5** **31**
That overseas trained veterinarians with limited registration play a vital role in filling skills gaps, such as those in the equine industry, academia and in abattoirs, in New South Wales.
- Finding 6** **44**
That veterinary practices in New South Wales are financially vulnerable due to:
- the cost of maintaining and delivering the standard of veterinary care expected by the public and required in the current regulatory environment
 - the ability of clients to pay for care
 - the expectation that discounted or free care will be provided to strays and injured wildlife
 - the rising cost of salaries due to the veterinary workforce shortage.
- Finding 7** **45**
That salaries, especially starting salaries for new graduates, are low compared to other professions. However, evidence suggests that the workforce shortage is leading to a gradual increase in salaries.
- Finding 8** **45**
That childcare shortages, particularly in rural and regional areas, are having an impact on the veterinary workforce.
- Finding 9** **46**
That veterinarians work long hours and have lower salaries than other professions. However, there is insufficient data to determine the extent of this issue across the entire workforce and whether the award conditions for veterinarians need to be reviewed.

- Finding 10** 46
That veterinarians are suffering mental stress and burnout, due to an interplay of factors, including:
- long working hours
 - client behaviour
 - workplace culture
 - moral and ethical challenges, particularly around the ending of life of healthy animals.
- Finding 11** 47
Suicide risks reported by the veterinary profession are highly concerning, and urgent action must be taken.
- Finding 12** 57
That veterinarians in rural and regional areas face additional challenges to their counterparts in the major cities, including:
- difficulties in providing after-hours coverage
 - large distances to be travelled to visit clients on farm
 - difficulty recruiting and retaining veterinarians, particularly for large animal work
 - difficulty finding a buyer for their practice
 - difficulty finding suitable housing
 - a lack of mentors, particularly for newly graduated vets
 - a lack of engagement with their services by primary producers.
- Finding 13** 72
That universities are encountering challenges in delivering veterinary science degrees to students, due to the high cost of delivery, and a shortage of academic staff. This also has an impact on students who are graduating with high student debts.
- Finding 14** 72
That further opportunities need to be provided for veterinary students and graduates to obtain an adequate understanding of large animal medicine.
- Finding 15** 87
That veterinary nurses and technicians are vital members of the veterinary workforce and will greatly benefit from regulation and professionalisation.
- Finding 16** 89
That regulation and better utilisation of veterinary nurses and technicians within the context of clinical practice is likely to assist in reducing the workload on the veterinarian.
- Finding 17** 103
That difficulties accessing veterinary care for pets and large animals, whether due to restricted service capacity or affordability, can impact on animal welfare.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

29

That the NSW Government provide dedicated, ongoing funding for the provision of veterinary services to wildlife, including for:

- wildlife rescue organisations
- existing wildlife hospitals
- support the expansion of wildlife units at other hospitals
- private veterinary practices to contribute to reasonable costs for services.

Recommendation 2

29

That the NSW Government consider amending the *Companion Animals Act 1998* to:

- ensure local government authorities collect stray animals from licensed veterinary clinics
- ensure that appropriate funding is provided to local government authorities to ensure that there is a consistent interpretation of the Act across all local government areas.

Recommendation 3

30

That the NSW Government develop a clearer regulatory framework for the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services and potentially help reduce the burden on the veterinary workforce.

Recommendation 4

30

That the NSW Government consider amending the *Veterinary Practices Act 2003* and other relevant legislation to ensure that mobile veterinary clinics can be easily registered to deliver veterinary care, particularly in areas with no clinic within a reasonable distance. Any changes must ensure mobile clinics work collaboratively to ensure they can provide essential additional veterinary services without causing detriment to local clinics.

Recommendation 5

31

That the NSW Government consider reviewing the *Veterinary Practices Act 2003* to ensure that the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW complaints investigation process is updated to allow for a streamlined process, and to distinguish between substantial complaints and those which are frivolous or vexatious.

Recommendation 6

31

That the NSW Government advocate to the Australian Government to:

- align visa requirements for veterinarians with those in the human medical field
- amend working holiday visa requirements for veterinarians to enable longer stays with a single employer.

Recommendation 7

32

That the NSW Government prioritise a review of the *Veterinary Practitioners Act 2003* and its associated regulation immediately following, or in conjunction with, the review of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* and associated regulations and codes.

- Recommendation 8** 45
That the NSW Government continue to work with the Australian Government to increase the availability of childcare places, particularly in regional and rural areas.
- Recommendation 9** 46
That the NSW Government provide grants to appropriate organisations to raise awareness and educate clients about the impact of their behaviour on veterinarians.
- Recommendation 10** 46
That the NSW Government consider funding the Australian Veterinary Association to support its work developing mental health programs for veterinarians.
- Recommendation 11** 47
That the NSW Government consider how it can support and promote the establishment of the field of Veterinary Social Work in New South Wales.
- Recommendation 12** 47
That the NSW Government, through the Agricultural Ministers Council, seek national support for a national veterinary workforce database, as proposed by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.
- Recommendation 13** 47
The Minister for Mental Health, in conjunction with the Minister for Agriculture, take steps to ensure suicide prevention programs are made available which are specifically targeted at veterinarians.
- Recommendation 14** 48
That the NSW Government examine data held by NSW government agencies regarding the suicide rate in the veterinary profession across the state over the last two decades, including all causal factors and develop a framework to better support mental health of veterinarians.
- Recommendation 15** 57
That the NSW Government considers providing financial incentives for veterinarians who work with livestock, to ensure an adequate number of large animal practitioners are available to support primary producers in regional areas.
- Recommendation 16** 58
That the NSW Government advocate for the Australian Government to trial incentives, including waiving HECS debt, to attract and retain veterinarians in New South Wales, and particularly in rural and in regional areas.
- Recommendation 17** 58
That the NSW Government provide funding for targeted grants to enhance mentoring for first year graduates in private practice in New South Wales, and particularly in areas outside of large cities.
- Recommendation 18** 58
That the NSW Government to consider providing incentives for veterinarians to take up NSW Local Land Service veterinary roles in regions where recruitment has been difficult.

- Recommendation 19** **59**
That the NSW Government conduct an assessment of the capacity of the government veterinary diagnostic services workforce, in particular veterinary pathologists, to respond to an emergency animal disease outbreak and to also meet projected future demands for diagnostic services. This assessment should be publicly released.
- Recommendation 20** **73**
That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate that veterinary schools and the accreditation body work together to action the recommendations of *Rethinking Veterinary Education*, the recent review of veterinary education commissioned by the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, which would help reduce the cost of course delivery.
- Recommendation 21** **73**
That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for the Australian Government to increase its per student contribution to universities for students studying to become veterinarians.
- Recommendation 22** **73**
That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for the Australian Government to provide funding for clinical training for veterinary students training in large animal practice.
- Recommendation 23** **74**
That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for universities to continue to review their student admission processes, to ensure that suitable candidates are chosen to study veterinary science.
- Recommendation 24** **88**
That the NSW Government seek to introduce a regulatory framework for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in New South Wales. The framework should encompass:
- minimum qualification requirements, in line with those already in use, specifically the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician Registration Scheme, and the scheme in Western Australia
 - title protection, where only those who meet the minimum qualification requirements can use the protected titles
 - professional standards, including a code of professional conduct
 - oversight by a professional board
 - appropriate rates of pay.
- Recommendation 25** **89**
That any regulatory framework for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in New South Wales:
- be provided under the same legislation as the regulation of veterinarians
 - be consistent with the scheme already in place in Western Australia, and aligned as much as possible with the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician voluntary scheme.

- Recommendation 26** **89**
That the NSW Government advocate for a nationally consistent registration scheme for veterinary nurses and technicians through the Ministerial Council for Agriculture and other appropriate forums.
- Recommendation 27** **90**
The NSW Government review the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* to determine whether some restricted acts of veterinary science could be extended to veterinary nurses and technicians who are regulated under the same legislative framework.
- Recommendation 28** **104**
That the NSW Government provide support for the Australian Veterinary Association to develop educational materials for pet owners containing information about:
- how veterinary clinics operate
 - how pet owners should budget for unexpected costs
 - how to create a positive relationship with the veterinary team
 - the potential benefits of pet insurance.
- This information should be available in a range of community languages.
- Recommendation 29** **104**
That the NSW Government consider using the NSW Pet Registry to provide educational material to pet owners.
- Recommendation 30** **105**
That the NSW Government advocate to the Australian Government for veterinarians to access the Translating and Interpreting Service for clients who hold Centrelink cards.
- Recommendation 31** **105**
That the NSW Government investigate strategies to best ensure veterinary care for pet owners particularly low income earners can be made more affordable.
- Recommendation 32** **105**
That the NSW Government investigate providing subsidised vet care to low-income earners, pensioner and animal rescue groups.
- Recommendation 33** **106**
That the NSW Government provide funding to animal rescue organisations and the university sector to increase subsidised treatments at their veterinary hospitals and provide increased training opportunities for veterinary science students and others.
- Recommendation 34** **106**
That the NSW Government consider options for trialling companion-animal friendly public transport.

Conduct of inquiry

The terms of reference for the inquiry were self-referred by the committee on 9 June 2024.

The committee received 213 submissions and seven supplementary submissions.

The committee held four public hearings: two at Parliament House in Sydney, one in Inverell and another in Wagga Wagga.

The committee also conducted site visits to:

- Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Camperdown and Camden campuses
- School of Veterinary Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga
- Inverell Veterinary Clinic, Inverell
- Gowrie Veterinary Clinic, Inverell.

Inquiry related documents are available on the committee's website, including submissions, hearing transcripts, tabled documents and answers to questions on notice.

Terms used in the report

The terms 'clinic', 'hospital' and 'practice' are used interchangeably in this report.

Note that the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* uses the term 'veterinary hospital' to refer to licensed premises; 'veterinary practice' refers to a business which provides veterinary services. 'Clinic', while not defined in the Act, is often used by veterinary practices as the name of their licensed hospital, and many currently licensed premises use the term 'clinic'.

The term 'veterinary science' is defined in the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* to include any branch of the science or art of veterinary medicine or of veterinary surgery.

The term 'vet' is used throughout the report to refer to qualified, registered veterinarians, also known as veterinary practitioners.

Also, the term 'paraprofessional' is used interchangeably with 'allied veterinary health professional', and to denote other non-veterinarian roles throughout this report for ease.

The report also uses the terms 'companion animal' and 'pet' interchangeably, with 'pet' being the preferred term, and in common usage. Specifically, most of the evidence to the inquiry with regard to pets concerns cats and dogs.

In veterinary practice, the term 'small animal' is used, and generally refers to pets.

The term 'large animal' refers to horses and livestock such as cows (for example dairy and beef cattle), sheep, goats, and pigs.

The term 'mixed animal practice' refers to veterinary practices that treat both large and small animals.

Chapter 1 Overview of the veterinary workforce in New South Wales

This chapter provides an overview of the veterinary workforce, particularly veterinarians and vet nurses and technicians, in New South Wales.² It then considers some of the key changes in the demand for veterinary services.

The workforce

- 1.1 The veterinary workforce in New South Wales comprises veterinarians and allied veterinary health professionals such as veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians. There are also other allied animal health roles within the industry such as farriers and equine dentists.

Veterinarians

- 1.2 The role of a veterinary practitioner is to safeguard animal health, welfare, and public health. Clinical practitioners may work with companion animals, horses, livestock, laboratory animals, aquatic animals, exotic animals, and wildlife.³ Most veterinarians work in clinical practice.⁴ Government veterinarians can work in animal health, public health, as on-plant veterinarians in abattoirs, and in biosecurity and quarantine systems.⁵ Veterinarians also work in industry, education and research, teaching, and in veterinary laboratory and pathology services.
- 1.3 The committee heard that veterinarians provide a public good in relation to animal welfare and health, food security, farm productivity, wildlife health, and in managing biosecurity threats, including emergency animal disease surveillance and response.⁶
- 1.4 There are three key requirements for being a registered veterinarian in New South Wales:
- completion of a veterinary science degree recognised by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC), the national accreditation body, or, if the degree is not recognised in Australia, by passing the Australasian Veterinary Examination administered by the AVBC
 - registration with the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW (the Board)
 - undertaking continuing professional development.⁷

² Note, veterinary technicians are also known as veterinary technologists.

³ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 2 and 15.

⁴ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 3.

⁵ Submission 193, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, p 3.

⁶ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 2.

⁷ *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*; *Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013*.

- 1.5 Veterinarians are primarily regulated by the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* and the associated Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013 (due for staged repeal in September 2024).⁸ The object of the Act is to regulate the provision of veterinary services for the following purposes:
- to promote the welfare of animals
 - to ensure consumers of veterinary services are well informed as to the competencies required of veterinary practitioners
 - to ensure that acceptable standards are required to be met by veterinary practitioners so as to meet the public interest and national and international trade requirements
 - to provide public health protection.
- 1.6 The mechanisms within the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* to achieve these objectives include:
- regulation of restricted acts of veterinary science
 - registration of veterinary practitioners
 - complaints and disciplinary processes
 - licensing of veterinary hospitals
 - appointment of inspectors who have powers to enter premises where there may be restricted acts of veterinary science taking place
 - establishment of the Board.⁹
- 1.7 The functions of the Board include:
- registering veterinary practitioners and licensing veterinary hospitals
 - investigating complaints against veterinary practitioners
 - taking disciplinary action against veterinary practitioners.¹⁰
- 1.8 Practising veterinarians are governed by a professional code, contained in the Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013,¹¹ which supports high standards of care for animal welfare and the integrity of the profession. The code includes the following requirements for professional practice:
- the welfare of animals must be considered at all times
 - there must be no refusal of pain relief to an animal in their presence; relief can comprise first aid, referral to another practitioner, or euthanasia

⁸ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 1. Note, during the next sitting period the Legislative Council will consider the Statute Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2024. The earliest this may occur is August 2024. If passed, the staged repeal of the *Veterinary Practice Regulation 2023* will be postponed until 1 September 2025 as a review of the Act is underway (see, Schedule 1[4] of the bill). *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 6 June 2024, p 1241.

⁹ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 1.

¹⁰ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 1.

¹¹ Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, Schedule 2 Veterinary practitioners code of professional conduct.

- maintaining currency of knowledge of standards of practice
- being available to provide ongoing care for an animal once it is accepted for diagnosis or treatment
- ensuring that all persons assisting them in the provision of veterinary services have the skills, knowledge and equipment to perform their duties to the standards required of veterinary science
- keeping detailed records of consultations, procedures and treatments
- only supplying restricted substances for the care of an animal they have physically examined, or is under their direct care.

1.9 The Board can refuse to register a veterinarian if they have been found guilty of an offence under various legislation, including the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* and the *Stock Medicines Act 1989*.¹² Other Acts that impact on veterinary practice include the *Radiation Control Act 1990*, the *Animal Research Act 1985* and regulations. The *Companion Animals Act 1998* and regulations also have indirect impacts on veterinary practices.¹³

Employment

1.10 Veterinarians can be employed privately or by government in the public sector. According to the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia, over 80 per cent of veterinarians are employed in small to medium businesses.¹⁴

1.11 At a national level, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) is 'the largest public sector employer of veterinarians in Australia, with 323 officers employed in designated veterinary roles as of 30 June 2023'. In New South Wales, the DAFF employ 41 veterinarians in total. Of these 41 vets, 30 are 'On Plant Veterinarians (OPVs) based at abattoirs registered to export meat to Australia's trading partners'.¹⁵

1.12 In New South Wales, the NSW Local Land Services in the Department of Regional New South Wales and the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), are the employers of public service vets. DPI employs 23 veterinarians primarily focused on policy, process and research and providing technical advice, including on animal welfare.¹⁶ NSW Local Land Services employ 53 veterinarians in the field across 11 regions with some positions vacant. These veterinarians work with large animals, particularly livestock, and play a critical role in natural disasters such as fires and floods.¹⁷

¹² *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, s 18(b)(i).

¹³ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 8.

¹⁴ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 15.

¹⁵ Submission 193, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, pp 3-4.

¹⁶ Evidence, Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries, 30 August 2023, p 49.

¹⁷ Evidence, Mr Rob Kelly, Executive Director, Local Land Services, Department of Regional NSW, 30 August 2023, p 50.

1.13 Further key points regarding employment data and demographics, include:

- in 2022:
 - 76 per cent of veterinarians were working in clinical practice
 - 4 per cent of veterinarians were working in government, including government research
 - 4 per cent of veterinarians were working in academia
 - 2 per cent of veterinarians were working in the pharmaceutical sector¹⁸
- in 2021, there were 2,505 full time equivalent veterinarians working in veterinary services¹⁹
- 70 per cent of the profession is female, with the majority under 40 years of age²⁰
- the majority of males in the profession are over 55 years of age.²¹

Supply of veterinarians

1.14 There was discussion during the inquiry about the supply of veterinary practitioners, particularly the number of veterinary science graduates, and the number of practising veterinarians.

1.15 The committee received evidence from the AVA that Australia graduates approximately 750 veterinarians per year, which is the highest number per capita in the world.²² There are currently two veterinary schools in New South Wales: the Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney and the School of Veterinary Sciences at Charles Sturt University. The Sydney School of Veterinary Science graduates approximately 120 Bachelor of Veterinary Biology/Doctor of Veterinary Medicine per year.²³ The School of Veterinary Sciences at Charles Sturt University graduates around 60 students with either a Bachelor of Veterinary Biology or a Bachelor of Veterinary Science.²⁴ Southern Cross University in northern New South Wales will introduce a veterinary science degree in 2025.²⁵ The challenges faced by universities and veterinary science students are examined in Chapter 5.

¹⁸ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 3.

¹⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 17, citing G Pratt, 'Veterinarians in Australia: A growing profession in need of a plan [dissertation].' (2023) *University of New England*.

²⁰ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 17, citing G Pratt, 'Veterinarians in Australia: A growing profession in need of a plan [dissertation].' (2023) *University of New England*; Australian Veterinary Association, *Veterinary Workforce Survey* (2021), <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>; Australian Veterinary Association. *Veterinary Wellness Strategy: Summary of research findings*, (2021) <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/resources/thrive/documents/avashort-report-research-findings.pdf>.

²¹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 17, citing G Pratt, 'Veterinarians in Australia: A growing profession in need of a plan [dissertation].' (2023) *University of New England*.

²² Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 16.

²³ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 1

²⁴ Evidence, Dr Geoffrey Dutton, Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University, 30 August 2023, p 19.

²⁵ Submission 140, Southern Cross University, p 1.

- 1.16** The Board reported that the number of registered veterinarians in New South Wales as of 30 June 2022 was 4,396, and that the total number of veterinarians has been increasing by approximately three per cent per annum from 2007 to 2022 (total increase of 56 per cent).²⁶ In 2022 approximately 370 veterinarians were added to the register, and 100 removed themselves from the register.²⁷
- 1.17** The committee received evidence that difficulty in recruitment and retention indicates that the supply of veterinarians is not sufficient. To this end, a member survey conducted by the AVA found that 63 per cent of respondents in New South Wales reported having advertised for a vacancy in the previous 12 months of which over 40 per cent were still vacant after 12 months.²⁸ Additionally, the AVA noted that up to 13 per cent of the members responding to another survey were considering leaving a veterinary role within the next 12 months.²⁹
- 1.18** These concerns were echoed by other stakeholders in both the private and public sectors.³⁰

Workforce participation

- 1.19** The changing composition of the veterinary workforce was discussed throughout the inquiry. In particular, there was a focus on the number of women in the profession, hours worked and the number of individuals practising.
- 1.20** As previously mentioned, approximately 70 per cent of veterinarians are women. The AVA noted that the increase of female participation in the veterinarian workforce is similar to that of other health related sectors.³¹
- 1.21** Although there has been an increase of veterinarians in the profession, the hours worked by practising vets has changed over time. This means that it would take more veterinary professionals to replace those that are leaving in order to match the hours worked.³² In a survey of its members in 2021, the AVA found that 25 per cent of veterinarians work part time (less than 30 hours per week).³³ Given the trend in part time employment, and the absolute growth in students graduated each year, it has been suggested that the current shortage is primarily an issue of retention rather than a supply issue.³⁴

²⁶ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 3.

²⁷ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 5.

²⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 34.

²⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 34.

³⁰ See for example, Evidence, Mr Kelly, 30 August 2023, p 51; Submission 209, NSW Farmers Association, p 2; Submission 181, Cat Protection Society of NSW, p 1; Submission 83, Kookaburra Veterinary Employment, p 3.

³¹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 17.

³² Some examples of change include the once-typical working week of more than 38 hours per week is no longer suitable and the workforce has been moving towards part-time hours since the 1980s, as referred to in Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 4.

³³ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 33.

³⁴ See for example, Evidence, Dr Georgia Ladmore, Veterinarian, 29 August 2023, p 3.

- 1.22** A number of stakeholders informed the committee that there are qualified veterinarians who are not currently participating in the workforce.³⁵ The AVA noted that across Australia, the number of vets has continued to increase since 2011, but that only 63 per cent of people with veterinary science qualifications were delivering veterinary services in 2021.³⁶ The NSW Farmers Association noted that many veterinarians leave the profession within 5 years of graduating.³⁷ These issues are examined in Chapter 3.

Salaries

- 1.23** Estimates of salaries and wage range for veterinarians varied in the evidence. Based on the Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award 2020, annual salaries progress from approximately \$60,000 to \$85,000.³⁸ Anecdotal evidence suggested that 'vet salaries have not exceeded \$100K',³⁹ whereas some recruitment advertisements have reportedly displayed remuneration up to \$150,000.⁴⁰
- 1.24** Figure 1 was provided by the AVA and compares the weekly (annual) income of veterinarians with medical doctors and dental practitioners. The AVA observed this data demonstrates that approximately 15 per cent of vets earn \$156,000 or more per annum, compared to approximately 50 per cent of dentists and medical general practitioners.⁴¹

³⁵ Submission 61, Dr Jocelyn Birch Baker, p 3; Submission 18, Name suppressed p 1; Submission 74, p 1.

³⁶ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 16.

³⁷ Submission 209, NSW Farmers Association, p 2

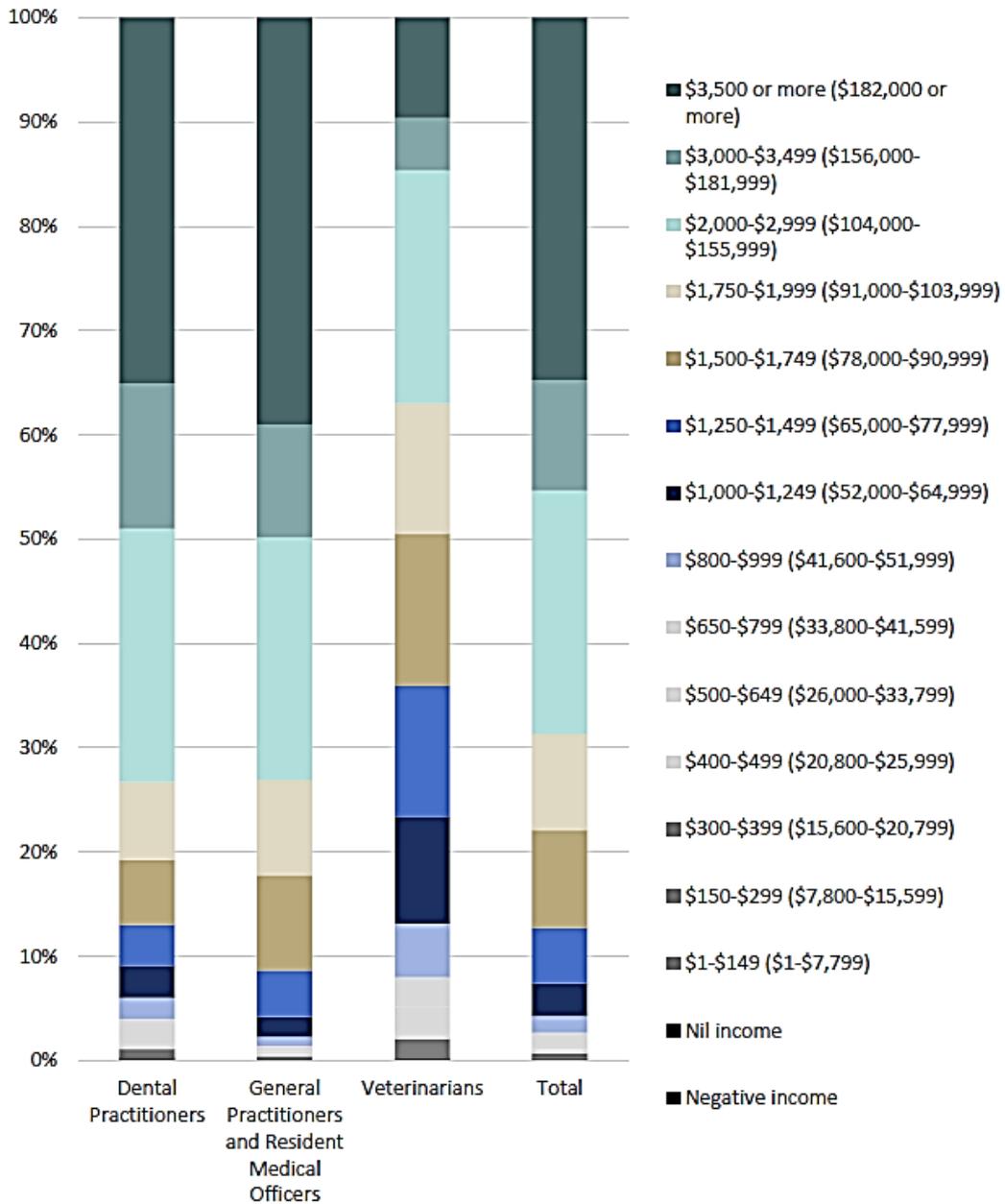
³⁸ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 5, citing Annual Wage Review 2022-2023, Determination, Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award 2020 [MA000118], <https://www.fwc.gov.au/documents/awardsandorders/pdf/pr762227.pdf>.

³⁹ Submission 18, Name suppressed, p 2.

⁴⁰ Submission 108, Dr Rodney Reece, p 9.

⁴¹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 20.

Figure 1 Weekly (annual) income by occupation



Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 20.

1.25 Stakeholders noted that while salaries remain low, there are some indications that the shortage is driving up salaries.⁴²

Mental health and wellbeing

1.26 A number of inquiry participants discussed the mental health and wellbeing of veterinarians. The AVA noted that burn-out 'has been recognised in the profession for some time' and that

⁴² Submission 78, Name suppressed, p 2; Submission 31, Hunter Equine Centre, p 1; Submission 112, Dr Andrew Havadjia, p 1; Submission 94, Animal Welfare League NSW, p 7.

research it conducted in 2019 indicated that over 25 per cent of the respondents have taken time off work due to stress or mental health.⁴³ Many individual veterinarians made submissions highlighting the prevalence of burn-out and mental health issues in the profession. Some of these issues were attributed to long hours and poor behaviour of clients.⁴⁴ These issues are explored in Chapter 3.

Veterinary nurses and technicians

- 1.27** Veterinary nurses and technicians are paraprofessionals within the veterinary workforce and can provide a range of support to a veterinarian, including client liaison, education and support; and technical assistance for specific veterinary services.⁴⁵
- 1.28** Vet nurses and technicians (or technologists) can hold formally recognised qualifications, such as a Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing or a Bachelor of Veterinary Technology, respectively, however there is no legal requirement for vet nurses to be registered.⁴⁶
- 1.29** In Australia, 42 per cent of the veterinary workforce are referred to as veterinary nurses, although legislation does not provide a definition for nurses or technicians.⁴⁷ The Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia provided that of the 10,700 employed veterinary nurses in Australia, 29.5 per cent reside in NSW. Of these, 51 per cent are working full-time.⁴⁸
- 1.30** Further information on veterinary nurses and technicians is examined in Chapter 6.

Demand for veterinary services

- 1.31** During the inquiry the committee received evidence about the increase in demand for veterinary services. Figure 2 shows the increase in the number of veterinary practitioners in relation to population growth. The AVA noted that previously, such data would be used to estimate the demand for companion animal veterinary services, however this has recently become a less reliable indicator due to changes in consumer expectations and ownership rates.⁴⁹

⁴³ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association

⁴⁴ For example, Submission 18, p 1; Submission 21, Mr Rodney Campbell, p 1; Submission 82, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁴⁵ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 2.

⁴⁶ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 1; Note veterinary technologist and veterinary technician are terms that can be used interchangeably, with veterinary technician being the more commonly used term.

⁴⁷ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 6.

⁴⁸ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, pp 6-7, citing Labour Market Insights, *Veterinary Nurses (ANZSCO ID 3613)*, Australian Government (10 September 2021), <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/occupation-profile/veterinary-nurses?occupationCode=3613#linksAndDownloads>.

⁴⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 17.

Figure 2 Number of veterinarians in Australia 2011 to 2022 in comparison to population growth

Year	Veterinarian numbers in Australia	Year by year difference	Growth	Population growth
2022	14,986	993	7.10%	0.99%
2021	13,993	- 353	-2.46%	0.98%
2020	14,346	498	3.60%	1.23%
2019	13,848	1,079	8.45%	1.51%
2018	12,769	1,079	8.93%	1.58%
2017	12,083	686	6.01%	1.63%
2016	11,418	665	6.07%	1.58%
2015	10,954	464	4.37%	1.49%
2014	10,629	325	3.08%	1.55%
2013	10,548	81	0.82%	1.68%
2012	9,929	619	6.26%	1.66%
2011	9,894	35	0.36%	1.53%

Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 16

- 1.32** The Board noted data showing that the growth in the number of pets was greater than the growth in the number of veterinarians in clinical practice. From 2019 to 2022, the average annual increase in dog ownership was 7.9 per cent and cat ownership was 8.6 per cent. For the same period, there was an average annual increase of 5.2 per cent in the number of veterinarians in clinical practice in New South Wales.⁵⁰
- 1.33** Vets are critical to the agricultural sector for the treatment and welfare of large animals.⁵¹ The Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia explained that the shortage of vets and therefore the reduced capacity of the veterinarian workforce 'will have severe implications on the production animal aspects of primary industry for biosecurity and food security, particularly in terms of surveillance'.⁵²
- 1.34** Likewise, NSW Farmers Association noted that the lack of vets, particularly in western New South Wales, can have significant impacts on livestock producers:

There are ... concerns with the limited number of vets in key locations across farming communities in regional areas particularly, Dubbo and Parkes region and Albury and Wodonga which currently have no afterhours services available. Callouts for emergency services are expensive and limited in certain circumstances. Some emergency calls out

⁵⁰ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, pp 3-4.

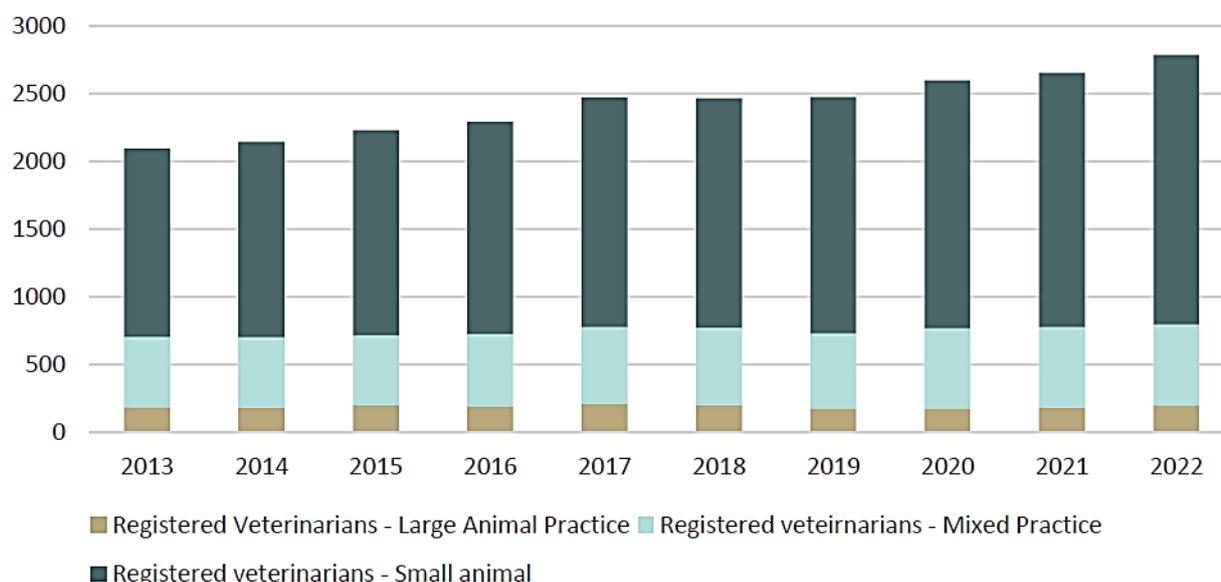
⁵¹ Submission 209, NSW Farmers Association, p 1.

⁵² Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 1. See also, Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 8.

to farms are not being responded to and/or responded within extended timeframes leading to livestock casualties and further complications at a significant cost to primary producers.⁵³

- 1.35** Stakeholders noted the increasing demand for companion animal services provided by veterinary practices in comparison to large animals. Figure 3 provided by the AVA shows the changes in the number of veterinarians from 2013 to 2022 in clinical practice (large, mixed and small practice).⁵⁴

Figure 3 Registered veterinarians in NSW by field of clinical practice



Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 14. Note, this data is headcount only.

- 1.36** The impact on both veterinarians and primary producers of the changing demand for veterinary services is examined in Chapters 3 and 4.

Committee comment

- 1.37** The committee applauds the veterinary workforce for its vital role in safeguarding animal health and welfare, and public health. The committee recognises that due to a range of factors, including the pressures of consumer demands and changing workforce composition, the number of practising veterinarians is insufficient to meet the needs of the community.

Finding 1

That due to a range of factors, including the pressures of consumer demands and changing workforce composition, the number of practising veterinarians and hours worked is insufficient to meet the needs of the community.

⁵³ Submission 209, NSW Farmers Association, p 4.

⁵⁴ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 14.

Chapter 2 Regulatory challenges for veterinarians

Initially, this chapter outlines the regulatory system for veterinarians. It then focusses on workload pressures that are caused by this environment, including responsibility for acts of veterinary science and the obligation to provide pro bono treatment to injured wildlife and lost, stray and homeless animals. The chapter also considers the requirement for veterinarians to provide after-hours care to animals, and options to enhance the use of telehealth to address this concern. Next, the chapter discusses veterinary premises and the use of mobile clinics, and the complaints handling and disciplinary processes of the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW. Finally, it examines the employment of overseas vets.

Regulatory environment

- 2.1** Each state and territory has its own legislation and regulatory regime for the veterinary profession. For the most part, practising vets must complete an accredited course from an Australian university and register with the relevant professional body in their state or territory.
- 2.2** As noted in Chapter 1, the regulatory environment for veterinarians in New South Wales is prescribed by legislation and regulation. The principal statute, *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, sets out:
- restricted acts of veterinary science
 - the practice of veterinary science
 - the registration of veterinarian practitioners, including necessary qualifications
 - requirements for veterinary hospitals
 - the establishment and responsibilities of the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW (the Board), including complaints handling.⁵⁵
- 2.3** Also, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Schedule 2 of the Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013 includes the *Veterinary Practitioners Code of Professional Conduct* which places obligations on veterinarians around the care of animals, including:
- ensuring the welfare of animals at all times
 - mandating the provision of pain relief, such as first aid treatment, referral to another veterinarian, or euthanasia, for an animal in their presence that is in pain or suffering
 - requiring they be available to provide ongoing treatment for an animal in their care.⁵⁶
- 2.4** The committee received evidence that many, but not all, of the challenges faced by veterinarians arise from the regulatory environment.⁵⁷ Specific concerns are discussed in the following sections.

⁵⁵ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 1.

⁵⁶ Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, Schedule 2 Veterinary practitioners code of professional conduct.

⁵⁷ See for example: Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 40-43.

- 2.5** Numerous stakeholders supported comprehensive reform of the regulatory environment. The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia, advocated that the NSW Government 'commit to legislative and regulatory reform to safeguard the role of the veterinary profession in the delivery of animal health and welfare, whilst making it adaptable to a constantly changing environment'.⁵⁸ The association noted that this would encompass a review of the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* and a review of the Act's interaction with other legislation including the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*.⁵⁹
- 2.6** The Board noted the review of animal welfare legislation is a government priority, and that a review of the *Veterinary Practitioners Act 2003* would follow, and that the regulations are due for staged repeal in September 2024.⁶⁰ Additionally, Dr Steven Ferguson, President, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, acknowledged that changes to the profession over the last 20 years mean that aspects of the legislation 'need some amendment', including obligations regarding animal welfare, after-hours requirements, and complaints investigation, all of which are examined in the following sections. Dr Ferguson also noted the need for regulation of paraprofessionals which is examined in Chapter 6.⁶¹
- 2.7** The NSW Department of Primary Industries advised that it has been working with the Board and the AVA on potential legislative reforms, including:
- registration of veterinary nurses, similar to the Western Australia model (examined in Chapter 6)
 - registration of student vets to do work under supervision of a vet
 - potential use of telehealth (discussed later in this chapter)
 - better streamlining of approvals for overseas vets to practice in New South Wales (discussed later in this chapter)
 - simplification of the registration of mobile vet clinics (discussed later in this chapter).⁶²
- 2.8** Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries, advised that changes to the legislation should be considered in the context of any changes to the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*, but that there is presently no timeframe for the review.⁶³

⁵⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 12.

⁵⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 12-13.

⁶⁰ Evidence, Dr John Baguley, Registrar, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 30 August 2023, p 32; Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 1. As noted in Chapter 1, during the next sitting period the Legislative Council will consider the Statute Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2024. The earliest this may occur is August 2024. If passed, the staged repeal of the *Veterinary Practice Regulation 2023* will be postponed until 1 September 2025 as a review of the Act is underway (see, Schedule 1[4] of the bill). *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 6 June 2024, p 1241.

⁶¹ Evidence, Dr Steven Ferguson, President, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 30 August 2023, p 30.

⁶² Evidence, Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries, 30 August 2023, p 56.

⁶³ Evidence, Mr Hansen, 30 August 2023, p 57.

Responsibility for acts of veterinary science

- 2.9** In accordance with the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* and the Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, only registered veterinarians can carry out 'restricted acts of veterinary science' such as examination and diagnosis of an animal, administering anaesthesia, and carrying out treatments that require anaesthesia.⁶⁴ Veterinary nurses may administer anaesthesia under direct supervision of a veterinarian.⁶⁵
- 2.10** Overall, inquiry participants recognised that veterinarians are highly qualified professionals who should be responsible for certain tasks and procedures.⁶⁶ However, it was also noted that veterinarians have a heavy workload that is, in part, caused by these responsibilities, which are increasing.⁶⁷
- 2.11** To this end, the AVA and others, including the Board, suggested that appropriately qualified and registered vet nurses could carry out certain procedures under direction or a lower level of supervision, thus reducing the workload on vets.⁶⁸ The role of vet nurses and other veterinary paraprofessionals is examined in Chapter 6.

Lay persons performing acts of veterinary science

- 2.12** There was discussion during the inquiry about lay persons (non-veterinarians) providing care to animals. In some cases, these individuals were considered to have performed restricted acts of veterinary science. In addition to animal welfare concerns, it was suggested that these people often do not face repercussions for their actions and undermine the sustainability of vet services.
- 2.13** The Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013 excludes the following as restricted acts of veterinary science, meaning that non-veterinarians can offer these services:
- diagnosing pregnancy in any animal other than a horse
 - cleaning, rasping, grinding or cutting the teeth of a horse
 - removing a loose tooth or deciduous tooth cap from a horse
 - using a power tool to carry out a procedure to maintain or restore correct dental function on a horse that has been adequately sedated under the immediate and direct supervision of a veterinary practitioner.⁶⁹
- 2.14** Dr Hannah Fotheringham, Veterinarian, Inverell Veterinary Clinic, observed that pet owners may use lay persons instead of vets for a variety of reasons, including lack of access to

⁶⁴ See, *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, s 7; Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, s 4.

⁶⁵ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 6.

⁶⁶ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 21; Submission 8, Dr Isaac Graham, p 1; Submission 103, Name suppressed, p 7.

⁶⁷ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 21.

⁶⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 41; Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 6; Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 4.

⁶⁹ Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, Part 2, Clause 4(1)(a) and (h).

professionals, cost, and under appreciation of a vet's medical knowledge.⁷⁰ This was reflected in the experience of Dr Greg Powell, Owner, Inverell Veterinary Clinic, who noted that his practice essentially competes with the lay practitioners by offering the same service, such as pregnancy testing with an ultrasound scanner, or specialised equine dentistry skills. However, he noted that his services have the added benefit of veterinary skills and knowledge.⁷¹

2.15 In her evidence, Dr Erica Kennedy, Veterinarian and Owner, Western Rivers Veterinary Group, stated that the increasing use of lay people had a direct negative impact on the frequency of on-farm visits by vets. Dr Kennedy noted this undermines the surveillance role vets play in disease detection and animal welfare.⁷²

2.16 Dr Isaac Graham, Associate Veterinarian, drew attention to the growing role of rural produce stores in providing animal health advice and selling products such as worming medications and vaccines. While noting the knowledge of staff at these stores, he expressed the concern that they lack the 'deeper understanding of animals' possessed by veterinarians, and that this can lead to conflicting advice from produce stores and veterinarians.⁷³

2.17 Inquiry participants suggested that certain lay people performing these tasks in some instances encroached on the role of the veterinarian in animal care, and possibly performed restricted acts of veterinary science. Dr Graham, indicated that the following services show how these lay people impinge on veterinary roles:

- cattle reproductive technicians who do work such as embryo transfer, artificial insemination, bull semen testing, and pregnancy testing
- equine lay 'tooth floaters' using power tools to rasp teeth or performing extractions
- dog and cat groomers offering anaesthetic-free dental care
- farriers administering sedatives.⁷⁴

2.18 Inquiry participants observed there are no strong mechanisms in place to regulate breaches of restricted acts of veterinary science by non-regulated providers. The AVA suggested that animal welfare agencies could have oversight instead, potentially by amending the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* to include a definition of cruelty as an unauthorised person performing a restricted act.⁷⁵

2.19 Beyond vet nurses working with veterinarians in a clinic, evidence to the inquiry showed that the profession was not supportive of further opening up acts of veterinary science to lay people.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Evidence, Dr Hannah Fotheringham, 14 December 2023, p 8.

⁷¹ Evidence, Dr Greg Powell, Owner, Inverell Veterinary Clinic, 14 December 2023, p 9.

⁷² Evidence, Dr Erica Kennedy, Veterinarian and Owner, Western Rivers Veterinary Group, 29 August 2023, p 14.

⁷³ Evidence, Dr Isaac Graham, Associate Veterinarian, 29 August 2023, p 13.

⁷⁴ Answers to question on notice, Dr Isaac Graham, 24 September 2023, p 1; Submission 134, Name suppressed, p 8.

⁷⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 41-42.

⁷⁶ Submission 8, Dr Isaac Graham, p 1; Submission 103, Name suppressed, p 7; Submission 7, Dr Kurt Enzinger, p 1.

Pro bono and below cost veterinary care

2.20 As noted in Chapter 1, the *Veterinary Practitioners Code of Professional Conduct* places obligations on veterinarians around the care of animals.⁷⁷ Dr Debbie Neutze, Veterinary Industry Consultant, explained that these obligations require veterinarians to treat any animal that is delivered to their practice and noted this can mean providing services for free:

What that means is if something turns up on their doorstep they will still need to treat it because, by law, they need to give first aid or emergency treatment to anything in their presence ... in most practices they would be treating wildlife for carers, and that's always been done for free.⁷⁸

2.21 Dr Rosemary Elliott, President, Sentient, the Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics, described veterinarians as frontline workers and said they played an essential role in performing society's 'dirty work'. Dr Elliot concluded: 'The day-to-day work is quite grinding'.⁷⁹

2.22 Inquiry participants noted that veterinarians face undue financial, physical and emotional burdens for providing a significant public good.⁸⁰ Following on, the committee received evidence that the government should take action to address these concerns. In its submission, the AVA advocated for the NSW Government to provide funding and a regulatory framework to support 'the provision of veterinary services for lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations'.⁸¹

2.23 The following sections consider requirements to treat injured wildlife, and lost, stray and homeless animals.

Injured wildlife

2.24 There was a great deal of discussion during the inquiry about treatment of injured wildlife. In particular, stakeholders noted that despite being obliged to treat wildlife, vet practices are often not recompensed for this service. Inquiry participants also raised concerns about whether vets are appropriately trained to treat these animals.

2.25 Apart from private non-specialist veterinary practices, there are few options for treatment of injured or sick wildlife, including:

- the dedicated wildlife hospital at the Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney Camden campus⁸²

⁷⁷ Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, Schedule 2 Veterinary practitioners code of professional conduct.

⁷⁸ Evidence, Dr Debbie Neutze, Veterinary Industry Consultant, 29 August 2023, p 6.

⁷⁹ Evidence, Dr Rosemary Elliott, President, Sentient, the Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics, 29 August 2023, p 2.

⁸⁰ Evidence, Dr Neutze, 29 August 2023, p 6. Also see, Evidence, Dr Brett Hodgkin, Chief Veterinary Officer, VetPartners, 29 August 2023, p 66; Evidence, Mrs Caroline Winter, Journalist, Creator of podcast series, *Sick As A Dog*, 29 August 2023, p 17.

⁸¹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 50.

⁸² Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, p 12.

- Wildlife Information and Rescue Service (WIRES), which trains volunteer rescuers and carers, operates a wildlife ambulance, and utilises the services of private veterinarians for treatment⁸³
- Taronga Wildlife hospitals, including one located at Dubbo⁸⁴
- Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital which provides free treatment to Australian native animals and is discussed in the case study below.⁸⁵

Case study - Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital⁸⁶

Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital (BBWH) is one of only two wildlife hospitals in New South Wales that treats all wildlife species.

BBWH provides its services for free to licensed wildlife rescue organisations and members of the public, and accepts wildlife referred to it by other veterinary practices. Its work includes rescue, treatment, recovery, rehabilitation and the release of native animals. As it is a mobile hospital inside a custom-built 22-wheel semi-trailer, it is also able to respond emergencies, including as part of the State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN). This includes triage, treatment and care for wildlife affected by disasters such as bushfires, floods, oil spills, disease outbreaks and mass strandings.

Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, BBWH, stated that the clinic has treated over 4,000 cases, with a return rate to the wild of approximately 50 per cent, which is relatively high.

Over its three years of operation, BBWH has spent approximately \$6 million on infrastructure, staffing and equipment, using donations and in-kind contributions from donors, volunteers and sponsors. BBWH estimates that it spends \$555 on average on each animal it treats. This includes the initial organisation, assessment, anaesthesia, X-rays, fluid therapy, pain relief and hospitalisation.

BBWH has found it difficult to recruit experienced wildlife veterinarians for weekends and casual shifts because it cannot pay adequate wages. Conversely, the hospital is a popular location for work placements for veterinary students and hosted 20 students in 2022. BBWH estimates approximately 15 per cent of its staff hours are spent supervising, instructing and evaluation the work of students, estimated to amount to approximately \$4,000 in kind expenditure per student.

In July 2023, the BBWH was to receive funding from the NSW Government of \$6 million over four years to support it in providing veterinary treatment and rehabilitation services for wildlife, and for community education. However, in late June 2023, it was advised that the funding had been revoked, as it did not represent 'value for money'.

⁸³ Submission 149, NSW Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIRES), p 4; Evidence, Mr Matt French, Head of Wildlife Welfare, Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service (WIRES), 29 August 2023, p 35.

⁸⁴ Submission 131, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, p 3; Submission 173, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁸⁵ Evidence, Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, 29 August 2023, p 34.

⁸⁶ Submission 131, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital; Evidence, Dr Van Mil, 29 August 2023, p 35.

Lack of recompense for treating wildlife

- 2.26** Numerous inquiry participants raised concerns that vet practices often do not receive appropriate payment for treating wildlife. Indeed, the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital noted the NSW Government *Review of the NSW Wildlife Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector* estimated that the minimum value of free veterinary services to wildlife across the state was approximately \$1.8 million each year.⁸⁷
- 2.27** Moreover, the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital noted that the *Independent Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 (2023)* conducted by Dr Ken Henry observed that the Crown meets none of the costs associated with caring for injured wildlife, 'even though all native wild animals are its legal property'.⁸⁸ Moreover, the review recommended that the NSW Government fund wildlife hospitals and reimburse veterinary practices for these costs.⁸⁹
- 2.28** Despite the lack of financial return, WIRES noted a survey conducted on behalf of the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage found that almost 75 per cent of veterinary practices were willing to treat wildlife.⁹⁰ This was reflected in evidence to the committee by a number of veterinarians who discussed the financial burden that providing free care to wildlife places on their practices, including:
- Dr Sandra Hodgins, Senior Veterinarian, Hospital Superintendent and Director, Summer Hill Village Vet, estimated that treating wildlife over the last two years has resulted in \$250,012 of forgone income (based on discounted fees of 25 to 50 per cent depending on the animal)⁹¹
 - Dr Evan Cosack estimated his practice spent \$10,000 on drugs and materials and the equivalent of approximately \$75,000 on professional fees per year⁹²
 - Dr Erica Kennedy estimated that her veterinary practice does approximately \$10,000 worth of free treatment of sick or injured wildlife per annum.⁹³
- 2.29** Inquiry participants noted that there are instances where vet practices are paid for treating injured wildlife. Mr Matt French, Head of Wildlife Welfare, WIRES, stated the organisation sometimes pays veterinarians for their work, but noted that it is not sustainable, or appropriate,

⁸⁷ Submission 131, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, p 2.

⁸⁸ Submission 131, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, p 1.

⁸⁹ Dr Ken Henry, *Final Report: Independent Review of the Biodiversity Act*, August 2023, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/186428/Independent%20Review%20of%20the%20Biodiversity%20Conservation%20Act%202016-Final.pdf>, p 35.

⁹⁰ Submission 149, NSW Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc (WIRES), p 8, quoting Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2021). *A survey of veterinary professionals about their interactions with free-living native animals and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in New South Wales, Australia*, *Australian Zoologist* 41(2) 254-282.

⁹¹ Tabled document, Dr Sandra Hodgins, Senior Veterinarian, Hospital Superintendent and Director, Summer Hill Village Vet, *Supporting data as per 17 August 2023*, 29 August 2023, p 1.

⁹² Submission 111, Dr Evan Cosack, p 2.

⁹³ Answers to questions on notice, Dr Erica Kennedy, 27 September 2023, p 7.

for the charity sector to be wholly responsible for paying vets for their work, especially given the role of government as regulator and 'owner' of wild animals.⁹⁴

2.30 The committee also heard concerns that the lack of recompense impacts on animal welfare. For example, a stakeholder observed: 'It's very distressing as a wildlife carer, I know some animals, given proper vet care can be saved, but that care is not available so it's easier to euthanise'.⁹⁵

2.31 Mr Matt French, Head of Wildlife Information, WIRES, indicated it can be very distressing for an injured wild animal to be kept waiting for treatment in a clinic next to cats and dogs, which are species which predate on them in the wild.⁹⁶ Mr French added that without adequate compensation for their services clinics have no incentive to provide space suitable for wildlife.

2.32 In addition to their intrinsic value and the welfare needs of sick wildlife, the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries noted that it is important for sick or injured wildlife to access veterinary services as they can provide surveillance data for emergency animal diseases (EADs).⁹⁷

2.33 Many stakeholders called for the NSW Government to better fund veterinary care for sick and injured wildlife.

- The AVA which sought 'appropriate financial support' for veterinary care for sick and injured wildlife provided by both charities and the private veterinary sector. However, the association was opposed to veterinarians being 'continually' obliged to provide these services at discounted rates.⁹⁸
- WIRES supported improved training opportunities for wildlife care for veterinarians, government incentives for those who treat wildlife, funding for clinics to create dedicated wildlife spaces, and a network of government supported 'facilities and treatment centres'.⁹⁹
- Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital advocated for reinstatement of its NSW Government grant which would have provided \$6 million over four years for treatment and rehabilitation of wildlife, and for community education.¹⁰⁰
- Individual veterinarians proposed solutions such as veterinary services provided to wildlife should be tax deductible.¹⁰¹

Vets' wildlife skills and knowledge

2.34 There was a suggestion during the inquiry that not all veterinarians have the knowledge and skills to treat injured wildlife. Mrs Ellie Robertson made this observation and noted that there

⁹⁴ Evidence, Mr French, 29 August 2023, p 35.

⁹⁵ Submission 173, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁹⁶ Evidence, Mr French, 29 August 2023, p 36.

⁹⁷ Submission 193, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, p 7.

⁹⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 12; Evidence, Dr Cristy Secombe, Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs, Australian Veterinary Association, 30 August 2023, p 44.

⁹⁹ Submission 149, WIRES, pp 11-12

¹⁰⁰ Submission 131, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, p 1.

¹⁰¹ Submission 191, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 135, Name suppressed, p 2.

is no financial incentive for veterinarians to improve these skills. Mrs Robertson further commented that in some cases, a vet will euthanise a wild animal because they lack the knowledge and expertise to treat it.¹⁰²

- 2.35** In its submission, WIRES reported on the responses to a survey of veterinarians in New South Wales. The responses showed that many veterinarians were aware that they may have insufficient knowledge or understanding of wildlife, with just under 50 per cent indicating they were able to provide services to wildlife 'of a high standard'.¹⁰³
- 2.36** The committee heard that practising veterinarians and vet students are willing to improve their wildlife knowledge and skills. As discussed in the case study, Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, noted the hospital has interest from vets and vet nurses from across Australia, and around the world, to do placements and learn key wildlife skills, especially as not all undergraduate courses provide this training.¹⁰⁴
- 2.37** In response to this demand, the Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney has created a teaching hospital dedicated to wildlife care. All final year students complete a one-week rotation at the hospital and undertake dedicated units of study in third year.¹⁰⁵ Southern Cross University told the committee that it plans to form partnerships with existing wildlife hospitals, including Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, to increase skills in the broad variety of native animals requiring veterinary care.¹⁰⁶

Lost, stray and homeless animals

- 2.38** As previously mentioned, vets are obliged to provide care for lost, stray and homeless animals. However, the cost of care for these animals is generally not recouped.¹⁰⁷ This issue was reflected in a survey conducted by the AVA of its members which found:
- 96 per cent of respondents took in strays
 - 81 per cent of practices do not receive payment for the care of strays
 - 92 per cent indicated that any payment received fails to cover the full cost of housing and treatment.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² Evidence, Mrs Ellie Robertson, 29 August 2023, p 28. Note that the practice of euthanising a suffering animal is in accordance with the Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, Schedule 2, Veterinary practitioners code of professional conduct: 'A veterinary practitioner must not refuse to provide relief ... to an animal in his or her presence'. 'Relief' can include euthanasia, if appropriate.

¹⁰³ Submission 149, NSW Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIRES), pp 6 and 7, quoting Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2021). *A survey of veterinary professionals about their interactions with free-living native animals and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in New South Wales, Australia*, Australian Zoologist 41(2) 254-282.

¹⁰⁴ Evidence, Dr Van Mil, 29 August 2023, p 39.

¹⁰⁵ Evidence, Professor Jacqueline Norris, Dean and Head of School, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, 30 August 2023, p 21,

¹⁰⁶ Evidence, Professor Jon Hill, Executive Dean, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Southern Cross University, 30 August 2023, p 20.

¹⁰⁷ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 8.

¹⁰⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 48.

- 2.39** Section 62 of the *Companion Animals Act 1998* provides that lost or stray animals must be delivered to either an owner, the council pound, or approved premises. However, the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW noted that strays are often delivered to the vet (as the operator of an approved premise). Moreover, there is no obligation for a council officer to collect a stray from the veterinary hospital.¹⁰⁹
- 2.40** A significant concern for stakeholders was how certain local councils manage strays.¹¹⁰ For example, Dr Hodgins told the committee that some local government authorities leave the cost and responsibility of strays with the vet who has been providing care, particularly where the owner cannot be located and therefore no costs can be recouped.¹¹¹
- 2.41** Many vets also provide discounted services to organisations who rescue and rehome unclaimed pets. Dr Hodgins noted that providing work at discounted rates to cat and dog rescue charities has led to her clinic charging \$172,650 from 2021 to 2023 for work worth \$383,666 at full price.¹¹² The work of rescue organisations and the contribution of private vets to this work is discussed further in Chapter 7.
- 2.42** The AVA observed that local councils collect animal management fees, impoundment fees and government grants, but there is no consistency across local government areas around payment and management of stray animals.¹¹³ The AVA advocated for the NSW Government to 'explore solutions that support the veterinary sector in its role with stray animals'.¹¹⁴

After-hours care

- 2.43** As previously noted, vets are obliged to ensure ongoing care is provided to any animal that they treat.¹¹⁵ In practical terms the AVA explained that this means that veterinary clinics must provide care after-hours or make arrangements with other clinics to provide an after-hours service for them.¹¹⁶ Dr Jocelyn Birch Baker, Consultant, Smooth Operating Vets and Practice Owner, observed that veterinarians often did not want full time employment because they are expected to do after-hours work on top of that.¹¹⁷
- 2.44** The method of provision of after-hours services depends on location. In urban areas there are often large centres that provide after-hours emergency care. In other areas, most practices will provide an 'on call' service, which is usually provided by the same veterinarians who provide

¹⁰⁹ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 10.

¹¹⁰ Submission 78, Name suppressed, p 3; Evidence, Dr Sarah Pollard-Williams, Veterinarian, 4 April 2024, p 2, expressed concerns that local government is not sufficiently funded to take in and treat strays.

¹¹¹ Tabled document, Dr Hodgins, *Supporting data as per 17 August 2023*, 29 August 2023, p 2.

¹¹² Tabled document, Dr Hodgins, *Supporting data as per 17 August 2023*, 29 August 2023, p 1.

¹¹³ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 48.

¹¹⁴ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 49.

¹¹⁵ Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, Schedule 2 Veterinary practitioners code of professional conduct.

¹¹⁶ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 39.

¹¹⁷ Evidence, Dr Jocelyn Birch Baker, Consultant, Smooth Operating Vets and Practice Owner, 29 August 2023, p 21.

daytime veterinary services. This has led to practices ceasing or reducing their after-hours service provision, which in turn reduces the access to after-hours vet care for animal owners and has an impact on animal welfare.¹¹⁸

2.45 The AVA noted that after-hours care can place undue physical, mental and emotional burden on veterinarians and may also impact negatively on recruitment and retention of staff, particularly in small practices.¹¹⁹

2.46 Inquiry participants shared the challenges of providing after-hours care, particularly in rural and regional areas with the committee.

- 'If you have multiple calls during the night, you are rarely fit to be performing surgery on pets at 9am. Then weekends can be even worse'.¹²⁰
- 'The main contributors to poor mental health in the industry include ... after hours expectations'.¹²¹
- '... [being on call] creates a 10 times risk of leaving the profession'.¹²²
- 'We now utilise a phone triage service and attend after hours emergencies until 10pm, and refer emergencies to a facility 90 minutes away after that time'.¹²³

Telehealth

2.47 Stakeholders suggested that expanding the use of telehealth, in certain circumstances, could help address after-hours service provision. Telehealth potentially has a number of limitations imposed by the regulations, including:

- not allowing vets to advise remotely on first-aid, or on the use of over-the-counter medicines
- only allowing prescriptions to be issued remotely if there has been an in-person examination by a vet.¹²⁴

2.48 However, the restrictions on telehealth under the Act are not clear cut. The Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW advised that it is possible that a telemedicine consultation is not a restricted act of veterinary science under the current legislation.¹²⁵

2.49 Dr Claire Jenkins, Veterinarian, Founder and CEO, VetChat, provided the following information about her telehealth service and its role in supporting vets, including:

- The online service is staffed by qualified vets, 24 hours seven days per week.

¹¹⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 39.

¹¹⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 6.

¹²⁰ Submission 96, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹²¹ Submission 97, Name suppressed, p 2

¹²² Evidence, Dr Liz Arnott, Chief Veterinarian, RSPCA NSW, 29 August 2023, p 49.

¹²³ Submission 89, Dr Leanne Bailey, p 1.

¹²⁴ Answers to questions on notice, VetChat, 26 September 2023, pp 2-3.

¹²⁵ Answers to questions on notice, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 28 September 2023, p 11.

- Pet owners can contact the service directly.
- Clinics can partner with the service to provide an out of hours triage service.
- VetChat has partnered with ten clinics in New South Wales in regional locations.¹²⁶

2.50 VetChat advocated for changes to the regulatory framework to allow the establishment of a genuine veterinarian-client relationship remotely, which would also facilitate the prescription of medicines.¹²⁷

2.51 Mr Stephen Albin, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League NSW, was supportive of the use of telehealth, especially for follow ups in areas reliant on mobile vet clinics.¹²⁸ However, as noted by the RSPCA, relying on telehealth as a follow up has limitations with respect to prescribing drugs and assisting with serious conditions.¹²⁹

Veterinary premises and the use of mobile clinics

2.52 As previously mentioned, requirements for veterinary practices are set out in the *Veterinary Practices Act 2003*, including that the premises of veterinary hospitals need to include land. The committee heard that, in practice, this limits the viability and operation of mobile vet clinics.¹³⁰

2.53 This was reflected in the evidence presented by the Animal Welfare League NSW which has a mobile veterinary truck that has been used in bushfire and flood emergency responses, and also visits regional and remote areas to provide microchipping and vaccination services.¹³¹ The league provided the following information on licensing of its mobile service:

- the mobile service is required to have a separate licence for each location it visits
- surgery is limited to desexing under anaesthetic
- a letter from a local vet is required to confirm post operative support for the animal.¹³²

2.54 Animal Welfare League NSW indicated that the Board is supportive but 'they are constrained by legislation'.¹³³

2.55 Despite its support of the Animal Welfare League, the Board raised a number of concerns about mobile services, particularly:

- Ongoing care, of 7 to 10 days, is required after surgery.

¹²⁶ Evidence, Dr Claire Jenkins, Veterinarian, Founder and CEO, VetChat, 29 August 2023, p 63.

¹²⁷ Answers to questions on notice, VetChat, 26 September 2023, p 2. Also, Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 56.

¹²⁸ Evidence, Mr Stephen Albin, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League, 29 August 2023, p 49.

¹²⁹ Evidence, Dr Liz Arnott, Chief Veterinarian, RSPCA NSW, 29 August 2023, p 49.

¹³⁰ Evidence, Dr Ferguson, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 30 August 2023, p 32.

¹³¹ Submission 94, Animal Welfare League NSW, p 8.

¹³² Answer to question on notice, Animal Welfare League NSW, 26 September 2023, pp 1-2.

¹³³ Submission 94, Animal Welfare League NSW, p 9.

- Mobile services are likely to 'cream off' services such as desexing, vaccination and non-urgent work.
- Mobile services would only be present for short times, leaving the local community without a veterinary service for the rest of the year.¹³⁴

2.56 Dr Kennedy had similar views to those of the Board. Dr Kennedy also observed that mobile clinics are not available out of hours. Moreover, she noted that welfare mobile clinics perform free or discounted services, which adds to 'the discontent by pet owners when charged by vets'.¹³⁵

2.57 Mr Mark Slater, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Services Australia, emphasised the important role of mobile veterinary clinics in ensuring veterinary services are available where required and assisting with the workload of vets, in conjunction with telehealth services. He noted that other Australian states allow mobile services.¹³⁶ The Animal Welfare League gave similar evidence, noting that:

It is not intended that the Animal Care Truck replace veterinary practices. We have noticed that good relations with local veterinary practices lead to higher uptake of Animal Care Truck services. Local veterinarians are also important to provide follow up care in the event that the truck has done surgery work and left the area.

The truck could be particularly effective in areas that have a veterinary practice, but that practice is suffering a veterinary shortage. It could be used as an emergency measure for areas without a local practice but the issue of access to follow up care would still need to be addressed.¹³⁷

2.58 The Animal Welfare League also highlighted the potential benefits their mobile vet truck could provide in terms of desexing, but expressed frustration as to their inability to offer these much-needed services in many areas:

You can't get approval, unless you're in a pound doing the desexings, to actually do the work on the truck. Last week we went to Deniliquin, Broken Hill and then back to Young. The issue is that in places like Broken Hill, RSPCA vet clinics are getting refurbished, I understand. In other places, like Parkes, there are no vets. We could easily do the desexings and the surgery there, but we just can't get the licences. That's the major regulatory impediment, because we're a mobile vet truck.¹³⁸

Complaints handling and the disciplinary process

2.59 As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW has responsibility for:

- registering veterinary practitioners and licensing veterinary hospitals

¹³⁴ Evidence, Dr Ferguson, 30 August 2023, pp 32-33.

¹³⁵ Answer to questions on notice, Dr Erica Kennedy, Veterinarian and Owner, Western Rivers Veterinary Group, 27 September 2023, p 9.

¹³⁶ Evidence, Mr Mark Slater, Director, Animal Services Australia, 30 August 2023, p 24.

- investigating complaints against veterinary practitioners
- taking disciplinary action against veterinary practitioners

2.60 The AVA acknowledged the importance of a co-regulatory system for the veterinary industry:

Regulation of the veterinary sector is a partnership between government and the veterinary profession. The profession itself has a strong interest in ensuring that appropriate standards of care are maintained for continued high standards and integrity. This is crucial for the maintenance of public safety, and confidence in the profession.¹³⁹

2.61 The Board made the following observations about its complaints handling process:

- for the previous financial year there were 81 formal complaints against 115 vets, representing three to four per cent of vets working in clinical practice in New South Wales
- complaints increased by 224 per cent from 2007 to 2022
- around 75 per cent of complaints are dismissed and up to 5 per cent are withdrawn
- many vets were of the view that the process was 'stressful, unfair, too long (average time for all complaints was 142 days) and that there is a presumption of guilt'
- complaints processes are largely dictated by veterinary practice legislation
- if the current rate of growth in complaints continues, the Board's current resource level will be mostly occupied with complaints handling.¹⁴⁰

2.62 Many inquiry participants expressed concerns with the complaint handling process, such as:

- the ease of making petty complaints¹⁴¹
- the legislative framework is not designed to protect against vexatious complaints¹⁴²
- a perception that the Board sides with the consumer¹⁴³
- a perception that complainants views are given more weight than that of veterinarians¹⁴⁴
- the need for copious note taking when providing a service in the event of a complaint being made.¹⁴⁵

2.63 Indeed, the AVA observed that the complaints process 'is not meeting contemporary practice'. The association also signaled that the community is increasingly litigious, which increases psychological risk for veterinarians, and leads to an added administrative burden.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 6.

¹⁴⁰ Submission 122, NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, pp 5-6 and 11.

¹⁴¹ Submission 96, Name suppressed, p 2.

¹⁴² Submission 100, Dr Julia Crawford, p 3.

¹⁴³ Submission 88, Dr Anthony James, p 2.

¹⁴⁴ Submission 60, Dr Mark Kallman, p 1.

¹⁴⁵ Submission 96, Name suppressed, p 2; Submission 13, Name suppressed, p 4.

¹⁴⁶ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 42.

- 2.64** The Board has proposed that the complaints process could move away from assigning individual blame and instead focus on processes. It noted this is similar to the system used in the airline industry and the health sector in some jurisdictions.¹⁴⁷
- 2.65** Sentient expressed a similar view, noting that right now complaints 'can only be investigated on an individual basis rather than considering the impact working conditions and management (including bullying) may have had on the matter'. They argued for 'a review of veterinary practice legislation to allow the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW to address complaints systemically, and to move beyond a merely disciplinary focus' because 'without addressing practice processes and culture, these will remain as underlying causes of further complaints'.¹⁴⁸
- 2.66** Mrs Ellie Robertson expressed the view that there should be an 'easy and fair process for members of the public to make complaints' regarding a vet or veterinary practices, noting the significant amount of fees clients pay for veterinary services:

There are avenues and processes for lodging complaints for most services and products and I don't see this as any different. We pay exorbitant fees to care for our animals and we are entitled, and within our rights, to be able to lodge a complaint where necessary.

I think a Veterinarian Ombudsman would be a good idea. Or perhaps once an Independent Office Of Animal Protection has been established, a department within this office could be responsible for processing, investigation and actioning complaints.¹⁴⁹

Overseas trained veterinarians

- 2.67** As discussed in Chapter 1, the veterinary workforce includes veterinarians who have acquired their degree overseas. There was support for using these vets, particularly during natural disaster responses, and for wildlife and government roles.¹⁵⁰ Stakeholders also noted that overseas trained vets can help fill skills gaps.¹⁵¹
- 2.68** Overseas trained vets fall into two categories: those whose degrees are recognised through the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) and those whose degrees are not ('non-equivalent' degrees). In both cases evidence to the inquiry indicated that visa requirements can be a barrier. These issues are discussed in further detail below.

Requirements for overseas graduates with non-equivalent degrees

- 2.69** The AVBC manages a three-step process for overseas graduates with non-equivalent degrees. The process for full registration ensures that these graduates have the skills and knowledge to meet the minimum standards required to practice as a veterinarian and includes:

¹⁴⁷ Answers to questions on notice, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 28 September 2023, p 11.

¹⁴⁸ Answers to supplementary questions on notice, Sentient, 28 September 2023, p 3.

¹⁴⁹ Answers to questions on notice, Mrs Ellie Robertson, 23 September 2023, p 4.

¹⁵⁰ Evidence, Dr Georgia Ladmore, Veterinarian, 29 August 2023, p 10.

¹⁵¹ Submission 31, Hunter Equine Centre, p 1.

- an eligibility assessment, including an English language proficiency test, and proof they hold a veterinary degree and are eligible to practice in the country where the degree was awarded, costing \$455
- a preliminary multiple-choice examination, allowing limited registration under supervision in New South Wales, costing \$3,050
- a final clinical examination in nine sections, over five days, costing \$8,240.¹⁵²

2.70 Once the process is completed, individuals can register with the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW.

2.71 There is also an option for limited registration. The Board advised that limited registration allows overseas qualified vets to work in their area of expertise or in an area of critical need, or under supervision, for example in horse work, particularly at times of seasonal need, and work in abattoirs.¹⁵³

2.72 Certain inquiry participants supported increased government support for overseas trained veterinarians.¹⁵⁴ For example, the AVA proposed that the NSW Government provide funding for work integrated learning opportunities to refresh 'species specific skills' for overseas trained vets, and to assist them to undertake their AVBC exams.¹⁵⁵ However, other witnesses had qualified support, as this would not necessarily address the shortage issues, including retention.¹⁵⁶

Visa requirements for vets wanting to work in Australia

2.73 Inquiry participants raised concerns about certain visa requirements for veterinarians hoping to work in Australia, including age caps, extensive waiting periods, and costs. The committee heard that these concerns make it difficult to recruit suitably qualified workers from overseas.¹⁵⁷

2.74 The AVA noted that the age cap for skilled visas is 45 years for veterinarians, whereas there are higher caps for human medical professionals wishing to emigrate to Australia. The AVA indicated that as it can take 10 to 15 years to become a specialist, this means that potential migrants with suitable specialisations may be too old to qualify for a skilled visa.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² Answers to question on notice, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, 29 September 2023, pp 1-2; Evidence, Dr Ferguson, 30 August 2023, p 31. Note, limited registration allows overseas qualified veterinarians to work in their area of expertise or in an area of critical need, or under supervision.

¹⁵³ Evidence, Dr Baguley, 30 August 2023, p 31; Evidence, Dr Ferguson, 30 August 2023, p 31.

¹⁵⁴ Answers to questions on notice, VetPartners, 20 September 2023, p 1; Answers to questions on notice, Dr Sandra Hodgins, 27 September 2023, p 1.

¹⁵⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 38.

¹⁵⁶ Answers to questions on notice, Dr Georgia Ladmore, 19 September 2023, p 1; Answers to questions on notice, Dr Erica Kennedy, p 6; Answers to questions on notice, Mrs Caroline Winter and Mr Garry Putland 26 September 2023, p 4.

¹⁵⁷ Submission 32, Goulburn Valley Equine Hospital, p 1., Submission 39, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁵⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 38.

- 2.75** The AVA noted that visa requirements and permanent residency restrictions require can cause barriers for veterinarians from overseas seeking to work as vets in Australia, even where their degrees are recognised.¹⁵⁹ In addition, the temporary skill shortage visa (Subclass 482) requires at least two years of work experience, making it inaccessible to new graduates from overseas. The working holiday visa (Subclass 417) and work and holiday visa (Subclass 462) can be used, but still have limitations.¹⁶⁰ The AVA suggested that the NSW Government advocate for changes to visas, including lifting of the age cap for permanent residency in line with that for human medical applicants.¹⁶¹ This was supported by many other stakeholders.¹⁶²

Committee comment

- 2.76** The committee heard from numerous stakeholders during this inquiry, including a significant proportion of the veterinarians practising in New South Wales. The committee acknowledges the vital, but difficult, work veterinarians do to ensure the welfare of animals and people are safeguarded across the state.
- 2.77** We support a rigorous regulatory system for veterinarians. However, the committee believes that there are opportunities to ensure that the regulatory environment better meets the needs of this profession.
- 2.78** Next, we acknowledge evidence supporting the opening up of certain acts of veterinary science as prescribed in the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* to suitably qualified vet nurses and technicians as a means of addressing vets' workloads. The committee is broadly supportive of this concept and has made findings and recommendations in Chapter 6 which examines the role of vet nurses and technicians.
- 2.79** The committee notes the tension in the evidence with regard to the workload upon veterinarians, at the same time hearing evidence that veterinarians were not welcoming of lay people providing care.

Finding 2

That there was a conflict in the evidence: the shortage of vets leads to an inability to see and treat all animals, and at the same time there was concern over lay people doing work traditionally completed by vets such as cattle pregnancy tests and dental check-ups on horses. This conflict remained unresolved.

- 2.80** The committee acknowledges that veterinarians perform a large proportion of work pro bono or for below cost. This situation, where the provision of a public good falls on the private sector, appears to be unique to the veterinary profession. It arises from requirements in the Veterinary

¹⁵⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, page 5.

¹⁶⁰ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 38.

¹⁶¹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 38-39.

¹⁶² Submission 171, VetPartners, p 7; Answers to questions on notice, VetChat, 26 September 2023, p 3; Answers to questions on notice, PetSure, 26 September 2023, p 1; Answers to questions on notice, Dr Erica Kennedy, 27 September 2023, p 6.

Practice Regulation 2013 (Schedule 2, the *Veterinary Practitioners Code of Professional Conduct*) but also the nature of the individuals who enter the profession as a vocation. While all veterinarians and practices are within their rights to refuse to see an animal, evidence to the committee showed this to be the exception rather than the rule. Regardless, the committee was shocked by the large amount of income forgone by vets when they treat animals for free or below cost. We note that the lack of value placed on services provided by veterinarians has contributed to the stress and burnout reported by so many participants in this inquiry. The committee considers this issue from the perspective of pet owners in Chapter 7.

- 2.81** We also acknowledge that this has been common practice to expect that vets provide this service for little or no recompense and it can be difficult to shift norms and expectations around caring for animals. On balance, the committee is concerned that it is likely that the sector will become reluctant to meet this public good, particularly if governments fail to meet at least some of the cost of delivering veterinary care.

Finding 3

That veterinarians provide a significant public good by providing services to injured wildlife, and stray, lost and homeless animals that is not currently appropriately recompensed by the NSW Government.

- 2.82** The committee believes that with the increasing workforce shortages and cost pressures on the veterinary sector, it is likely that the number of vets undertaking wildlife work for free or below cost will decrease. In the context of continuing and more frequent natural disasters this is of great concern. The committee understands that wildlife is owned by the Crown, that is, the NSW Government. The NSW Government provides funding to the wildlife care and rehabilitation sector, including for veterinary care. However, the committee notes that many private veterinary practices provide significant amounts of pro bono services and care to treat injured wildlife and more work needs to be done to address funding for these services.
- 2.83** The committee was disappointed by the amount of funding provided by the NSW Government to the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital. The committee notes that the best care for wild animals is in an environment separate to domestic animals, therefore dedicated wildlife hospitals or wildlife hospital units are more likely to provide the best chance of recovery for these animals. We recommend that the NSW Government provide dedicated, ongoing funding for the provision of veterinary services to wildlife, including for:
- wildlife rescue organisations
 - existing wildlife hospitals
 - support the expansion of wildlife units at other hospitals
 - private veterinary practices to contribute to reasonable costs for services.

Recommendation 1

That the NSW Government provide dedicated, ongoing funding for the provision of veterinary services to wildlife, including for:

- wildlife rescue organisations
 - existing wildlife hospitals
 - support the expansion of wildlife units at other hospitals
 - private veterinary practices to contribute to reasonable costs for services.
-

2.84 The committee notes that vets are often working without recompense when boarding and treating stray animals presented to them by members of the public. The committee learned that this is particularly an issue where the local pound will not accept animals out of hours, or where the owner cannot be located. Evidence to the committee also indicated that veterinarians sometimes care for a lost animal for days and have no recourse to recompense from the local government authority. The committee is concerned at the level of cost shifting from local government authorities to veterinary clinics.

2.85 We also recognise that local government authorities vary in their interpretation of the *Companion Animals Act 1998* and how they manage strays, which has an impact on the veterinary practices in their area. To ensure greater consistency in this area, the committee recommends that the NSW Government consider amending the *Companion Animals Act 1998* to:

- ensure local government authorities collect stray animals from licensed veterinary clinics
 - ensure that appropriate funding is provided to local government authorities to ensure that there is a consistent interpretation of the Act across all local government areas.
-

Recommendation 2

That the NSW Government consider amending the *Companion Animals Act 1998* to:

- ensure local government authorities collect stray animals from licensed veterinary clinics
 - ensure that appropriate funding is provided to local government authorities to ensure that there is a consistent interpretation of the Act across all local government areas.
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2.86 The committee notes that Portfolio Committee No. 8 – Customer Service is undertaking a concurrent inquiry into Pounds in New South Wales. We anticipate that its recommendations and findings will address concerns about animal welfare and the use of veterinarians in these organisations.

2.87 The committee heard from many vets, particularly those in regional areas, about the impact of being required or expected to provide veterinary care around the clock and the significant impact this has on their health and wellbeing. The committee understands that the use of a telehealth triage service may assist with reducing some after-hours call outs, while also noting that it cannot replace a face to face consultation in many situations. The committee acknowledges these concerns but notes that, regardless, the legislation could be clearer as to how telehealth can be used to advise animal owners. To this end, the committee recommends that the NSW Government develop a clearer regulatory framework for the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services and potentially help reduce the burden on the veterinary workforce.

Finding 4

That the provision of after-hours care has a significant impact on veterinarians' health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 3

That the NSW Government develop a clearer regulatory framework for the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services and potentially help reduce the burden on the veterinary workforce.

- 2.88** The committee notes the use of mobile veterinary clinics, particularly by animal welfare services. On one hand, we acknowledge the benefits of mobile clinics particularly in rural and regional areas where access to vet care is often limited, and mobile vet trucks can provide a large community benefit in offering vaccination and desexing programs, as well as in emergencies such as fires and floods. We also recognise that these clinics could have detrimental effects on surrounding practices by taking away income and creating customer expectations for low fee veterinary care. However, the committee also heard evidence about the ability for mobile vet clinics to work with and complement local veterinary clinics. On balance, the committee recommends that the NSW Government consider amending the *Veterinary Practices Act 2003* and other relevant legislation to ensure that mobile veterinary clinics can be easily registered to deliver veterinary care, particularly in areas with no clinic within a reasonable distance. Any changes must ensure mobile clinics work collaboratively to ensure they can provide essential additional veterinary services without causing detriment to local clinics.
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Recommendation 4

That the NSW Government consider amending the *Veterinary Practices Act 2003* and other relevant legislation to ensure that mobile veterinary clinics can be easily registered to deliver veterinary care, particularly in areas with no clinic within a reasonable distance. Any changes must ensure mobile clinics work collaboratively to ensure they can provide essential additional veterinary services without causing detriment to local clinics.

- 2.89** The committee notes evidence from key stakeholders, including the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, that its complaints investigation process needs to be revised and updated. The number of complaints has risen, with many vets perceiving that the Board sides with the complainant. We recommend that the NSW Government consider reviewing the *Veterinary Practices Act 2003* to ensure that the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW complaints investigation process is updated to allow for a streamlined process, and to distinguish between substantial complaints and those which are frivolous or vexatious.
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Recommendation 5

That the NSW Government consider reviewing the *Veterinary Practitioners Act 2003* to ensure that the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW complaints investigation process is updated to allow for a streamlined process, and to distinguish between substantial complaints and those which are frivolous or vexatious.

- 2.90** The committee acknowledges the vital role of overseas trained veterinarians, particularly those with limited registration, who fill skills gaps, such as those in the equine industry, academia and in abattoirs. It is important to ensure these professionals are properly supported and assisted to become fully registered, if they so desire. We note that the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council is working on recognising and accrediting more overseas degrees.
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Finding 5

That overseas trained veterinarians with limited registration play a vital role in filling skills gaps, such as those in the equine industry, academia and in abattoirs, in New South Wales.

- 2.91** We note that another barrier for overseas qualified vets relates to Australian visa requirements. Even where all the requirements are met, the process for securing a visa can be lengthy and arduous. In addition, there are visa limitations, such as age cut offs and working visa requirements, that effectively reduce the pool of qualified vets that can work in Australia. The committee considers these to be problematic barriers which should be removed. To this end, we recommend that the NSW Government advocate to the Australian Government to:
- align visa requirements for veterinarians with those in the human medical field
 - amend working holiday visa requirements for veterinarians to enable longer stays with a single employer.
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Recommendation 6

That the NSW Government advocate to the Australian Government to:

- align visa requirements for veterinarians with those in the human medical field
 - amend working holiday visa requirements for veterinarians to enable longer stays with a single employer.
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- 2.92** We note that the *Veterinary Practitioners Act 2003* is more broadly overdue for review. Additionally, it is acknowledged that during the next sitting period the Legislative Council will consider the Statute Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2024. The earliest this may occur is August 2024. If this bill is passed, the staged repeal of the *Veterinary Practice Regulation 2023* will be postponed from 1 September 2024 to 1 September 2025 as a review of the Act is underway. We recommend that the NSW Government prioritise a review of the *Veterinary Practitioners Act 2003* and its associated regulation immediately following, or in conjunction with, the review of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* and associated regulations and codes.
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Recommendation 7

That the NSW Government prioritise a review of the *Veterinary Practitioners Act 2003* and its associated regulation immediately following, or in conjunction with, the review of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* and associated regulations and codes.

Chapter 3 Other challenges for veterinarians

This chapter outlines further issues faced by veterinarians, including financial sustainability, growth of corporate ownership and changing demographics of the workforce. The chapter also considers veterinarians' mental health, stress and burnout, and options to address these concerns. It concludes with a discussion about how the lack of comprehensive data collection hinders the development of workforce planning in the industry.

Note, issues relating to rural and large animal practice are discussed in Chapter 4 and concerns specific to veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians are discussed in Chapter 6.

Workforce challenges

- 3.1** The committee received extensive evidence about the difficulties veterinarians as employees or owners of veterinary hospitals. Dr Zachary Lederhose, NSW Division President, Australian Veterinary Association, identified a list of 'unprecedented' challenges that are confronting the profession including:
- workforce shortages
 - financial obstacles
 - 'chronic' underinvestment in the labour component of vet practice
 - generational shifts and societal changes
 - burnout and poor mental health.¹⁶³
- 3.2** Other concerns identified by stakeholders included increased working hours,¹⁶⁴ difficulties attracting and retaining vets,¹⁶⁵ and increased expectations regarding the provision of care and service delivery.¹⁶⁶
- 3.3** The following case study illustrates many of these challenges, as experienced by a recently graduated veterinarian.

¹⁶³ Evidence, Dr Zachary Lederhose, NSW Division President, Australian Veterinary Association, 30 August 2023, p 38.

¹⁶⁴ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 13; Submission 171, VetPartners, p 4; Submission 193, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, p 5.

¹⁶⁵ Submission 83, Kookaburra Veterinary Employment, p 1, noted that vacancy rates have increased more than four-fold in the last nine years. There is no pool of unemployed vets in Australia, hence for every job filled, another becomes vacant.

¹⁶⁶ Submission 171, VetPartners, p 4; Submission 179, Dr Georgia Ladmore, p 2.

Case study - Recently graduated veterinarian¹⁶⁷

A recent veterinary graduate, with approximately four years work experience, shared their experience of working across a range of veterinary practice settings.

They moved to a country town for their first job out of university in a rural mixed practice. Unfortunately, it became very stressful. Clients had high expectations of 'gold standard' medicine but at a low cost. Clients were not understanding in situations where sometimes cheaper treatment options were unsuccessful, despite being advised of the risks and chances of success.

After-hours work was required, on top of 40 to 50 standard hours per week. They described being rostered from 8 am to 6 pm, too busy to have a lunch break, then being on call from 6 pm to 8 am overnight, before being rostered on again from 8 am to 6 pm. They had a car accident driving home after a particularly busy weekend on call, where they had had few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

The heavy workload also made it difficult to create networks in a new town. They said 'It is hard to join sport teams when you are often called out during practice or game times. It is hard to find time to make friends when you are exhausted to the bone'.

They now work in the city, where there is better work life balance, but it is still difficult to leave work on time. Clients can be difficult, as they may have waited days for an appointment, or cannot afford the recommended care. This situation was particularly common in emergency work where there was no pre-existing client-vet relationship.

They have considered leaving the profession. They feel burnt out and underappreciated, and with low wages cannot afford a mortgage now they live in a city, with most of their wages paying for rent.

Financial sustainability

3.4 Numerous stakeholders expressed concerns about the difficulty of operating a financially sustainable veterinary clinic. Financial sustainability depends on an interplay of various factors including service delivery costs; salaries; ability of the community to pay for care; and expectations to provide free or discounted care to strays and wildlife.¹⁶⁸

3.5 The committee heard that service delivery costs for vet practices have increased due to factors such as:

- standard equipment now used in a veterinary clinic, like ultrasound machines, digital radiographs, and blood analysis machines, can cost tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Submission 96, Name suppressed.

¹⁶⁸ See, for example: Submission 28, Dr Gundula Rhoades, pp 3-4; Submission 9, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 28-29.

¹⁶⁹ Evidence, Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, 29 August 2023, p 42; Evidence, Dr Sandra Hodgins, Senior Veterinarian, Hospital Superintendent and Director, Summerhill Village Vet, 29 August 2023, p 8; Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 28.

- increased standards and requirements for infrastructure, disposables, therapeutics, labour component per individual patient, and continuing education.¹⁷⁰

- 3.6** Stakeholders noted that coupled with the increasing cost is the difficulty of cost recovery in those communities with fewer resources. This can lead to some vets providing services at a discount, or requires difficult conversations around the cost of treating a sick animal which does not attract government subsidies, unlike human health care.¹⁷¹
- 3.7** As discussed in Chapter 2, many inquiry participants, including the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) observed that society benefits from veterinarians' willingness to provide care to strays and wildlife and to provide discounted desexing, but they are at the expense and ultimately the financial sustainability of these business.¹⁷²
- 3.8** The AVA and numerous veterinarians also commented that one of the symptoms of financial instability was the inability of owners to find a buyer for their practice, particularly in rural areas.¹⁷³
- 3.9** The cost of veterinary care and the impact on pet owners is examined in Chapter 7.

Salaries

- 3.10** Evidence presented to the committee discussed various concerns about the salaries paid to veterinarians. Independent practice owners and animal protection organisations suggested they could not afford to offer salaries that are competitive with large corporate entities or locum placements.¹⁷⁴
- 3.11** According to the AVA, a graduate veterinarian can expect to earn approximately \$60,000 per year.¹⁷⁵ A recurring theme elsewhere in the evidence was that the comparatively low salaries available to vets made it difficult to pay off HECS debts, and that the salaries earned did not compare well to other professions.¹⁷⁶ Low wages combined with HECS debts have been blamed for recent graduates leaving for other industries with better remuneration.¹⁷⁷
- 3.12** Moreover, the AVA suggested that more experienced veterinarians are not adequately recompensed for their skills. The association provide evidence that veterinarians earn less than other university graduates when wages were compared nine years after graduation. Its workforce survey data shows that real wages growth has been low in the sector, and give a poor return on

¹⁷⁰ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 28.

¹⁷¹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 28.

¹⁷² Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 28.

¹⁷³ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 33; Submission 30, Dr Christine Smith, p 1. Submission 54, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 28, Dr Gundula Rhoades, p 2.

¹⁷⁴ Submission 188, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁷⁵ Submission 144 Australian Veterinary Association, p 31.

¹⁷⁶ See for example: Submission 44, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 43, Dr Greg Nash, p 1; Submission 50, Dr Rodney Starr, p 1.

¹⁷⁷ Submission 116, Name suppressed, p 2.

investment in education compared to other professions and sectors. This was considered to be one of the factors responsible for low retention in the profession.¹⁷⁸

3.13 The impact of low salaries was a recurring theme in submissions from individual vets who told the committee:

- Low wages combined with rising inflation has meant needing to work more hours to afford basic necessities like groceries, electricity and rent.¹⁷⁹
- The veterinary award wage is very low given the level of education and years of study needed to obtain a degree and is one of the contributing factors to vets leaving private practice.¹⁸⁰
- There is often limited opportunity for advancement in clinical practice, with the maximum salary often being low compared to other professions.¹⁸¹

Growth in corporate ownership

3.14 The introduction of the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* allowed for corporations to own veterinary practices in partnership with registered veterinarians.

3.15 The committee received evidence from a corporation, VetPartners, which owns and operates 50 clinics and five specialty hospitals in New South Wales and employs 222 veterinarians. VetPartners noted that owners often sell their practices to corporations due to the lack of individual vets willing to own a clinic.¹⁸²

3.16 A number of submissions raised concerns about the increase in corporate entities owning veterinary clinics. Stakeholder argued that drawbacks of increasing corporatisation included:

- limits to career pathways as they reduce the possibility of practice ownership and earning a reasonable income¹⁸³
- competition for staff with independent practices¹⁸⁴
- an increase in consultation fees¹⁸⁵
- underinvestment in regions with small populations and lower socioeconomic status due to lower returns on investment¹⁸⁶
- cessation of provision of large animal services.¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁸ Submission 144 Australian Veterinary Association, pp 29-30.

¹⁷⁹ Submission 98, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁸⁰ Submission 103, Name suppressed, p 8.

¹⁸¹ Submission 117, Dr Ken Jacobs, p 11.

¹⁸² Submission 171, VetPartners, p 2.

¹⁸³ Submission 207, Jon Holcombe BVSc, p 1.

¹⁸⁴ Submission 18, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁸⁵ Submission 47, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁸⁶ Submission 29, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁸⁷ Submission 145, Dr Jasmin Klocker, p 4.

- 3.17** On the other hand, certain inquiry participants identified advantages of corporatisation, including:
- increasing employment flexibility such as part time employment and no after-hours work¹⁸⁸
 - structured mentoring programs¹⁸⁹
 - access to specialists¹⁹⁰
 - corporation wide triage systems, reducing the out of hours burden on veterinarians.¹⁹¹

Changing demographics of the workforce

- 3.18** As discussed in Chapter 1, there has been a substantial increase in the number of female veterinarians. A number of inquiry participants reflected on how the number of women in the profession has contributed to the veterinary workforce shortage.
- 3.19** The committee heard that previously the veterinary profession was a male-dominated workforce, who generally worked long hours running practices, and were not generally primary caregivers to their children.¹⁹² Various stakeholders discussed the correlation between the increase in female veterinarians, who often need to balance caring responsibilities, and the increase in part-time work in the profession.¹⁹³ For example, Dr Andrew Havadjia stated: 'In my own practice, I have never had any female employee return to full time work once they have had children, this includes both veterinary and support staff, as well as my wife (who is also a veterinarian)'.¹⁹⁴
- 3.20** The committee heard from some inquiry participants who believed that there needed to be positive action to increase the number of males studying veterinary science to balance out the number of women in the veterinary workforce.¹⁹⁵
- 3.21** However, most of the evidence about increasing engagement in the workforce, particularly female veterinarians, focused on improving childcare services. There was also evidence suggesting that the trend towards part time work reflects the desire for a health work life balance, and that both male and female veterinarians were moving towards part time work.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁸ Submission 29, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁸⁹ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 11.

¹⁹⁰ Submission 29, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁹¹ Submission 117, Dr Ken Jacobs, p 15.

¹⁹² Submission 190, Name suppressed, p 6.

¹⁹³ Submission 15, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 27, Name suppressed, p 1.

¹⁹⁴ Submission 112, Dr Andrew Havadjia, p 1.

¹⁹⁵ Submission 112, Dr Andrew Havadjia, p 1. Submission 43, Dr Greg Nash, p 2.

¹⁹⁶ Submission 151, Sentient, The Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics, p 2.

Access to childcare

- 3.22** A great deal of evidence focused on the difficulties veterinarians face accessing childcare.¹⁹⁷ The committee heard that the lack of childcare places, plus the extended hours often worked by vets made it challenging for some vets to remain in the workforce once they had children.¹⁹⁸ This is further compounded by low salaries for vets, which means they are not necessarily the main earner in the household. This results in some vets leaving the workforce entirely to take on looking after their child.¹⁹⁹
- 3.23** Access to childcare can be especially difficult outside major cities. Dr Jo Hoad, owner of the Uralla Veterinary Clinic in northern New South Wales, described the difficulty of getting childcare or even a nanny for herself and her staff. Dr Hoad told the committee that a new childcare centre due to open in Armidale had 300 people on the waiting list. In her own practice, she tries to be flexible with her hours to accommodate family needs.²⁰⁰
- 3.24** Stakeholders noted that access to childcare was determining factor for some families as to whether they would live in the area.²⁰¹ Indeed, a veterinarian explained how access to childcare influenced the type of veterinary roles she was willing to take:
- ... it took almost a year to get four days per week [of childcare], and feel lucky I can get family care for day five. Being a single parent also significantly impacts upon my ability to do after hours and emergency work. This impacted my decision to change from full time mixed practice work, to primarily working as a district veterinarian which affords me regular, 'daycare friendly' working hours.²⁰²
- 3.25** Dr Julia Crawford, Veterinarian and past President of the Australian Veterinary Association, suggested government support for childcare in rural and remote areas, including the introduction of favourable visas for those who work in childcare or as nannies in the regions.²⁰³

Mental health, stress and burnout

- 3.26** As noted in Chapter 1, there was discussion throughout the inquiry that a significant proportion of vets are experiencing poor mental health, stress and burnout. Indeed, the AVA reported that in 2019, 66.7 per cent of veterinarians surveyed had experienced a mental health condition, compared to 61.8 per cent in the general population.²⁰⁴ The association added: "The worst-case

¹⁹⁷ Evidence, Dr Hodgins, 29 August, 2023, p 10; Evidence, Dr Ann-Margret Withers, Senior Manager, Outreach Programs, RSPCA NSW, 29 August 2023, p 48; Evidence, Dr Cristy Secombe, Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs, Australian Veterinary Association, 30 August 2023, p 41; Submission 13, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 69, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 103, Name suppressed, p 3; Submission 112, Dr Andrew Havadjia, p 1.

¹⁹⁸ Evidence, Dr Hodgins, 29 August 2023, p 10.

¹⁹⁹ Evidence, Dr Georgia Ladmore, Veterinarian, 29 August 2023, p 8.

²⁰⁰ Evidence, Dr Jo Hoad, Owner, Uralla Veterinary Clinic, 14 December 2023, p 4.

²⁰¹ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 9, quoting <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-29/childcare-shortage-wangaratta-regional-australia-family-growth/101528242>.

²⁰² Submission 13, Name suppressed, p 1.

²⁰³ Submission 100, Dr Julia Crawford, p 1.

²⁰⁴ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 5.

scenario for those with mental health challenges is death by suicide. The evidence suggests risk of death by suicide is increased in the veterinary profession compared to the general population'.²⁰⁵

3.27 There was debate during the inquiry about root causes of challenges in the profession. Certain stakeholders argued issues started at the university level. Others believed that the industry has been slow to adapt to community expectations. The AVA summarised these concerns:

Mid to late career veterinarians are often of the opinion that the veterinary education systems are incorrectly selecting students, or not adequately preparing them for the profession, as they are perceived to lack resilience. Early career veterinarians and veterinary educators often comment that the profession has been slow to adapt to the changing expectations of recent generations.²⁰⁶

3.28 In addition to the challenges identified in Chapter 1 and previously in this chapter, stakeholders identified a range of other factors that can increase stress and affect the mental health of veterinarians, and may lead to some leaving the profession:

- emotional investment in patient outcomes²⁰⁷
- poor interactions with the community and damaging social media²⁰⁸
- moral distress when owners cannot afford to pay for treatment, and therefore the animal suffers, or they are asked to put it down²⁰⁹
- aggressive clients²¹⁰
- distressing situations at pounds where there is pressure or a requirement to euthanise animals²¹¹
- lack of mentoring and other support in the workplace²¹²
- poor workplace culture, including double standards for men and women.²¹³

3.29 Dr Georgia Ladmore, Veterinarian, described how these concerns impact on the ability of veterinarians to stay engaged in the profession:

... it's hard to stay engaged within the profession and want to go to work each day when you don't know whether you are going to be arguing with the innards of a cow while

²⁰⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 36.

²⁰⁶ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 33-34.

²⁰⁷ Submission 12, Dr James Rawson, p 2.

²⁰⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 5.

²⁰⁹ Submission 151, Sentient, The Veterinary Institute for Animal Ethics, p 4; Submission 12, Dr James Rawson, p 3; Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 15.

²¹⁰ Submission 17, Dr Timothy Mather, p 2; Submission 51, Dr Bruce Krumm, p 1; Submission 99, Name suppressed, p 1.

²¹¹ Evidence, Mr Mark Slater, Director, Animal Services Australasia, 30 August 2023, p 26.

²¹² Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 3.

²¹³ Submission 74, Name suppressed, p 7. Also, Evidence, Dr Liz Arnott, Chief Veterinarian, RSPCA NSW, 29 August 2023, p 53.

it's sleeting outside, or ... get punched because [someone] doesn't like what you've got to say about their cat.²¹⁴

- 3.30** The AVA pointed to high attrition rates for veterinarians in the early years of their career and suggested that this is linked, amongst other things, to low career satisfaction.²¹⁵ The association suggested some solutions including better career pathways and progressions and improved workplace culture, including flexibility.²¹⁶
- 3.31** Some veterinarians called for better regulation of working hours for veterinarians, including a limit on the number of hours worked.²¹⁷ The relevant award, the Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award 2020, does not include a limit on the amount of overtime that can be worked.²¹⁸
- 3.32** Inquiry participants told the committee that, in certain instances, a confluence of factors may cause veterinarians to take their own lives. In particular, the committee received evidence about Dr Sophie Putland, a veterinarian who took her own life in 2021, and whose death has led to the formation of Sophie's Legacy. The work of Sophie's Legacy and Dr Putland's experience is discussed in the case study below.

Case study – Sophie's Legacy²¹⁹

The charity Sophie's Legacy was established by the family of Dr Sophie Putland, a veterinarian, who took her life in 2021 at the age of 33 years, after the pressures of her various workplaces, including client abuse, became too much.

Sophie had done two or three practicums during university but probably was not fully prepared for the 'toughness' of some of her workplaces. For example, she worked long hours and found it difficult to achieve a work/life balance. In one workplace she was on a shift from 10.00 pm until about 4.00 am or 5.00 am. Sophie also found some workplaces had poor leadership, low trust, and bullying. Sophie's father observed that Sophie probably was not the type to admit they had a mental health problem.

Much of the work of Sophie's Legacy has focused on a public education campaign for clients of vet clinics, focusing on encouraging respectful behaviour towards veterinary staff.

The campaign includes the poster 'We're Only Human' designed to be displayed in veterinary clinics urging clients to be kind and respectful to staff.

The poster includes a QR code which allows the user to 'Take the Pledge' to be kind and respectful.

The South Australian Government, where the family is based, has contributed funding to continuing the campaign.

²¹⁴ Evidence, Dr Ladmore, 29 August 2023, p 10.

²¹⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 34

²¹⁶ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 57.

²¹⁷ Submission 116, Name suppressed, p 2; Submission 96, Name suppressed, p 1.

²¹⁸ Fair Work Ombudsman, *Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award 2020*, https://library.fairwork.gov.au/award/?km=MA000118#_Toc163232211.

²¹⁹ Submission 150, Sophie's Legacy; Evidence, Mr Gary Putland, Founder, Sophie's Legacy, 29 August 2023, p 19, 21 and 25.

The campaign was based on the results of survey undertaken by Sophie's Legacy. The survey received responses from 600 vets and staff, of which 92 per cent were female and many were under 35 years of age.

Respondents were asked to identify key challenges faced on a daily basis, with the following challenges identified including:

- understaffing and long hours (identified by 52 per cent of respondents)
- client expectations (identified by 51 per cent of respondents)
- client abuse (identified by 37 per cent of respondents)
- poor wages (identified by 27 per cent of respondents)
- compassion fatigue (identified by 16 per cent of respondents).

Sophie's Legacy notes that the psychological profile of the average veterinarian is high intelligence, introversion, conflict avoidant and perfectionism. Therefore, an aggressive client interaction is likely to have a more severe impact on a vet than someone from the general population.

3.33 Mrs Caroline Winter, Journalist and creator of the podcast series *Sick As A Dog*, described to the committee what she learnt over 18 months interviewing vets and vet students and creating her podcast:

... they're passionate, perfectionist and private people, who have high expectations of themselves and will work a 14-hour day without lunch and without a toilet break, if needed, just to do the right thing by the animals ... But I also heard from too many how they're burnt out, stressed, underpaid and underappreciated. For some, if they had their time again, they would have chosen another career ...²²⁰

3.34 Mrs Winter noted that every vet she spoke to knew of at least one colleague who had committed suicide. She was also concerned at the lack of up to date and accurate data on suicide.²²¹

3.35 Other witnesses noted that the suicide rates are potentially compounded by vets having access to euthanasia drugs. Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, expressed the view that there needs to be better regulation of euthanasia drugs.²²² Other veterinarians touched on the need for better management of these drugs.²²³

3.36 Another witness, Dr Liz Arnott, Chief Veterinary Officer, RSPCA NSW, cautioned against the potential of blaming industry problems on the personality of veterinarians: 'I did hear the view that it was a little bit of victim blaming to have people go into an impossible profession and then blame their personality traits'.²²⁴

²²⁰ Evidence, Mrs Caroline Winter, Journalist and creator of the podcast series *Sick As A Dog*, 29 August 2023, p 17.

²²¹ Evidence, Mrs Winter, 29 August 2023, pp 17 and 26.

²²² Evidence, Dr Van Mil, 29 August 2023, p 41.

²²³ Submission 179, Dr Georgia Ladmore, p 3; Submission 50, Dr Rodney Starr, p 2.

²²⁴ Evidence, Dr Arnott, NSW, 29 August 2023, p 47.

3.37 The committee heard that industry participants are taking action to address the mental health, stress and burnout concerns of veterinarians. For example, the independent review commissioned by the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ) recommended that 'Veterinary professional associations should assist employers in taking charge of the workplace issues that affect recruitment, retention, and wellbeing'.²²⁵

3.38 The AVA has called on the NSW Government to commit funding to support services including:

- training for managing challenging client interactions
- better data collection, including accurate data on suicide statistics and surveys to check the mental health of the workforce
- career pathway mentoring
- a public awareness campaign to educate the community and address the increase in physical and verbal assault.²²⁶

3.39 The AVA was also very supportive of the emerging field of 'Veterinary Social Work' as a means of reducing the mental health burden on veterinarians:

Veterinary Social Work (VSW) is an emerging field in Australia, and veterinary social workers provide the added benefit of being trained and experienced to embrace a multi-disciplinary and holistic approach to managing often complex human social needs in the context of veterinary care. The inclusion of this skill set in the clinical environment team improves the wellbeing and mental health of veterinary teams.²²⁷

3.40 The AVA noted there is currently only one veterinary social worker in Australia. The AVA indicated they would like to see additional funding for this emerging field, citing a program that is already being 'piloted' through the Victorian Government.²²⁸

3.41 RSPCA NSW was also supportive of increasing the use of veterinary social workers in Australia, as a way to support the mental health of veterinary practitioners:

Managing the emotions and mental health of clients can take a significant toll on veterinary practitioners. In the USA, efforts to support veterinarians and clients has included the creation of a discipline in veterinary social work. Veterinary social work is now an established discipline in social work which assists in the delivery of veterinary care by supporting the emotional needs of the animal owner and the veterinary team to achieve good outcomes. This model shows potential for promotion in Australia and these roles could be supported particularly in practices servicing a higher proportion of vulnerable clients.²²⁹

²²⁵ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 4.

²²⁶ Answer to question on notice, Australian Veterinary Association, 29 September 2023, p 6; Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 36.

²²⁷ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 61.

²²⁸ Evidence, Dr Robyn Whitaker, Australian Veterinary Association, and Founding Director, Veterinary and Community Care, 30 August 2023, p 42.

²²⁹ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 17.

Data collection

- 3.42** A number of inquiry participants told the committee that planning and strategies to address veterinary workforce challenges were hampered by a lack of comprehensive data at a state level and nationally.
- 3.43** The committee heard that the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW currently only collects data on the head count of registered veterinarians and where they are practising, for example in clinical, government agency, or academic settings; or non-practising. The Board does not collect data on the hours worked or type of employment, such as full-time, part-time or casual.²³⁰ However, the Board stated that it is currently updating its database to include information on the number of full-time equivalent vets working in New South Wales.²³¹
- 3.44** The Board also does not collect data on licensed veterinary hospitals. This means there is no information on hospital size, services provided, and species of animal being treated.²³²
- 3.45** The Board has recommended the creation of a meaningful collection metric so that it can collect veterinary workforce data which can be used for 'assessing the capacity of the profession to respond to emergencies such as fire and flood, and biosecurity events and to trends in veterinary client expectations'.²³³
- 3.46** The AVA carries out periodic surveys of its members, which has provided useful insights into trends, including information on hours worked. However, it was noted that the AVA only has membership of approximately 50 per cent of registered vets and the response rate is poor.²³⁴
- 3.47** The Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) has started developing a national database and recommended that the NSW Government provide support for this project. The AVBC explained the benefits of such a database which would unify multiple disparate datasets on registered vets currently held by the respective Australian and New Zealand registration boards and provide:
- accurate data and 'increased visibility' of workforce trends
 - rapid identification of veterinarian registration status and prompt access during an emergency response
 - assistance in making informed decisions about responses to workforce shortages.²³⁵
- 3.48** The veterinary education review commissioned by the VSANZ supported the work of the AVBC, and recommended it work with the AVA to undertake an annual workforce survey.²³⁶

²³⁰ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 4

²³¹ Evidence, Dr Steven Ferguson, President, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 30 August 2023, p 30

²³² Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 9.

²³³ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 12.

²³⁴ Submission 2, Dr Steven Roberts, p 1; Submission 136, Dr Debbie Neutze, p 4.

²³⁵ Submission 189, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, p 6.

²³⁶ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 3.

- 3.49** Separately, as noted in the section on mental health, stress and burnout, there is little or no accurate or up to date data on suicide rates in the veterinary profession. Mrs Winter noted that the only published information is with respect to Victoria and Western Australia from 2008.²³⁷ The charity, Sophie's Legacy, has called for a National Suicide Register of veterinarians.²³⁸ The AVA has proposed that funding be provided to collect more accurate data on suicide in the profession.²³⁹

Committee comment

- 3.50** The committee notes that the challenges discussed in this chapter are not new, and not necessarily unique to the veterinary industry, but together appear to have created a 'perfect storm' for this sector and are contributing to the workforce shortage. However, unlike the regulatory environment discussed in Chapter 2, the levers and scope for government to effect change are limited.
- 3.51** The evidence in this chapter points to a complex interplay of cause and effect, symptoms and impacts. The discussion on financial sustainability, where vet practices must grapple with service delivery costs; salaries; the ability of the community to pay for care; and expectations to provide free or discounted care to strays and wildlife, underscores this issue. The committee recognises that subsidised vet care for low-income earners, pensioners and animal rescue groups (discussed further in Chapter 7) may alleviate some of the stress and conflict currently faced by veterinarians. In an effort to address some of this vulnerability, the committee made recommendations in Chapter 2 with respect to government funding for services for strays and wildlife. However, we acknowledge that is unlikely to provide a solution to the financial viability of many struggling clinics.

Finding 6

That veterinary practices in New South Wales are financially vulnerable due to:

- the cost of maintaining and delivering the standard of veterinary care expected by the public and required in the current regulatory environment
- the ability of clients to pay for care
- the expectation that discounted or free care will be provided to strays and injured wildlife
- the rising cost of salaries due to the veterinary workforce shortage.

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- 3.52** The committee notes that the salary conundrum is one of the many paradoxical issues that has emerged in the course of this inquiry. Ideally, market forces would solve issues such as low salaries, which should increase in response to workforce shortages. Unfortunately, the same market forces dictate that a business that is not returning a profit for its owners should close its doors. Indeed, we found it very concerning that many veterinary clinics are struggling to remain financially viable, particularly in areas where the community is less able to pay for veterinary care.

²³⁷ Evidence, Mrs Winter, 29 August 2023, p 26.

²³⁸ Submission 150, Sophie's Legacy, p 4.

²³⁹ Answers to questions on notice, Australian Veterinary Association, 29 September, p 6.

- 3.53 The committee acknowledges that salaries are not commensurate with the level of expertise and amount of training to become a veterinarian. However, there was also evidence that salaries are increasing due to the workforce shortage.

Finding 7

That salaries, especially starting salaries for new graduates, are low compared to other professions. However, evidence suggests that the workforce shortage is leading to a gradual increase in salaries.

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- 3.54 The committee notes that there are mixed views concerning corporatisation of veterinary clinics. However, on balance, it seems that these services may have greater scope to support flexible workplaces and pay salaries at a market rate.

- 3.55 We recognise that the changing demographics of the veterinary profession, specifically the increase in young women, has in part contributed to the workforce shortage. The proposals to address this change varied, including encouraging university admission processes to promote a balance of female and male students. Other evidence suggested that the concern was not gender based, but the inability to return to work once women become parents due to the shortage of childcare places. The committee does not agree that a gender balanced workforce will solve the underlying causes of the veterinary workforce shortage, so much as addressing other factors such as childcare availability and working long hours.

Finding 8

That childcare shortages, particularly in rural and regional areas, are having an impact on the veterinary workforce.

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- 3.56 The committee is of the view that this is an issue that should continue to be addressed by governments and therefore recommends that the NSW Government continue to work with the Australian Government to find ways to increase the availability of childcare places, particularly in regional and rural areas.

Recommendation 8

That the NSW Government continue to work with the Australian Government to increase the availability of childcare places, particularly in regional and rural areas.

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- 3.57 The committee was concerned to learn of the long hours worked by veterinarians, particularly those in their first role. Without adequate data, it is not possible to make a recommendation, however, the committee notes the results of various AVA workforce surveys and evidence from individual vets. This leads us to find that overall, the hours worked and the recompense are mismatched, and further workforce data would be useful in unpicking this issue and finding possible solutions, including a potential review of the relevant industrial award. The lack of data is addressed in Recommendation 12.

Finding 9

That veterinarians work long hours and have lower salaries than other professions. However, there is insufficient data to determine the extent of this issue across the entire workforce and whether the award conditions for veterinarians need to be reviewed.

- 3.58** The committee is very concerned at the level of mental stress and burnout reported in the veterinary profession. Much of this is related to stressful client interactions and increased workloads. The committee notes that poor customer behaviour is considered a stressor in other professions, including the health professions.
-

Finding 10

That veterinarians are suffering mental stress and burnout, due to an interplay of factors, including:

- long working hours
 - client behaviour
 - workplace culture
 - moral and ethical challenges, particularly around the ending of life of healthy animals.
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- 3.59** The committee acknowledges the work of Sophie's Legacy which has focussed on educating clients about the impact their behaviour may have on veterinarians. The committee was impressed by the program and the fact that the South Australian Government has seen fit to provide it with funding.
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Recommendation 9

That the NSW Government provide grants to appropriate organisations to raise awareness and educate clients about the impact of their behaviour on veterinarians.

- 3.60** Similarly, we recognise the work of the Australian Veterinary Association in researching mental health and wellbeing in the sector, and developing programs which would address some of these issues. The committee recommends that the NSW Government consider funding the AVA to support its work developing mental health programs for veterinarians.
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Recommendation 10

That the NSW Government consider funding the Australian Veterinary Association to support its work developing mental health programs for veterinarians.

- 3.61** The committee notes the evidence received from the Australian Veterinary Association and other key stakeholders about the emerging field of veterinary social work, and potential social workers have to reduce the mental health stress on veterinarians and manage challenging client relationships. The Committee believes this sounds very promising, and recommends the NSW Government consider how it can support and promote the establishment of the field of Veterinary Social Work in New South Wales.
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Recommendation 11

That the NSW Government consider how it can support and promote the establishment of the field of Veterinary Social Work in New South Wales.

- 3.62** The committee acknowledges the lack of accurate and comprehensive data on the veterinary workforce and notes that policy decisions rely on measurable outcomes. The committee supports the proposal for a national workforce dataset, given the small size and mobility of the veterinary workforce. Therefore, we recommend that the NSW Government, through the Agricultural Ministers Council, seek national support for a national veterinary workforce database, as proposed by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council. The NSW Government should seek national support for such a project through its participation on the relevant Ministerial Council.
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Recommendation 12

That the NSW Government, through the Agricultural Ministers Council, seek national support for a national veterinary workforce database, as proposed by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.

- 3.63** The committee was also deeply concerned about the evidence suggesting high suicide rates in the veterinary profession. This was particularly alarming, coupled with the access veterinarians have to restricted drugs. The committee believes that urgent action must be taken to address suicide in the veterinary industry, and recommends that the government take steps to ensure suicide prevention programs are made available which are specifically targeted to veterinarians. The committee understands there is a need for more robust and up-to-date public data on suicides in the profession. The committee recommends that the NSW Government examine data held by NSW government agencies regarding the suicide rate in the veterinary profession across the state over the last two decades, including all causal factors and develop a framework to better support mental health of veterinarians.
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Finding 11

Suicide risks reported by the veterinary profession are highly concerning, and urgent action must be taken.

Recommendation 13

The Minister for Mental Health, in conjunction with the Minister for Agriculture, take steps to ensure suicide prevention programs are made available which are specifically targeted at veterinarians.

Recommendation 14

That the NSW Government examine data held by NSW government agencies regarding the suicide rate in the veterinary profession across the state over the last two decades, including all causal factors and develop a framework to better support mental health of veterinarians.

- 3.64** The committee also notes evidence regarding the significant mental health concerns and high suicide rates associated within the veterinary profession, which has also been linked to their access to restricted drugs. In light of this, the committee believes that any review around 'restricted acts' must proceed with caution, and access to restricted drugs must be kept highly limited.

Chapter 4 Rural and regional veterinary practices

Veterinarians practising in rural and regional areas face many of the same challenges as those in cities. In addition to considering how these obstacles affect rural and regional vets, this chapter will discuss issues specific to veterinary services for large animals, livestock producers, the meat export industry and others. It will also overview how veterinarians are used in emergency response situations.

Regional and rural veterinary practices

- 4.1 Regional and rural veterinary practices play a key role in managing the health of animals, including production animals on farms. Veterinarians in these areas may have a mixed practice, where they treat large animals, generally livestock and horses, and small animals.
- 4.2 The committee heard that vet clinics in rural and regional areas experience many of the same concerns as those in cities, such as financial viability, recruitment, hours worked, and after hours work.²⁴⁰ There was also extensive evidence presented to the committee on the additional challenges faced by veterinary practices, particularly mixed practices, outside of the major cities. The committee heard of concerns about:
- providing after-hours coverage²⁴¹
 - covering large geographical areas²⁴²
 - recruiting vets, particularly for large animal work²⁴³
 - selling a practice once a veterinarian had retired²⁴⁴
 - some towns no longer having a veterinary practice²⁴⁵
 - accessing childcare²⁴⁶

²⁴⁰ For the purposes of this report the terms 'rural' and 'regional' have been used to generally denote those areas outside of the major cities in New South Wales. The ABS has a specific geographical classification called Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia Plus based on relative geographic access to services. The terms 'rural' and 'regional' are not defined in this index, and evidence presented to this inquiry generally did not refer to it. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Remoteness Areas*, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs-edition-3/jul2021-jun2026/remoteness-structure/remoteness-areas>.

²⁴¹ Evidence, Dr Glen Borrowdale, Inverell Veterinary Clinic, 14 December 2023, p 7; Submission 13, Name suppressed, p 2.

²⁴² Submission 88, Dr Anthony James, p 1.

²⁴³ Evidence, Dr Brett Hodgkin, Vet Partners, 29 August 2023, p 64, Submission 13, Name suppressed, p 1.

²⁴⁴ Submission 54, Name suppressed, p 1.

²⁴⁵ Evidence, Mr Stephen Albin, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League NSW, 29 August 2023, p 46; Submission 209, NSW Farmers Association, p 1.

²⁴⁶ Submission 100, Dr Julia Crawford, p 1; Submission 13, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 103, Name suppressed, p 3.

- finding suitable housing²⁴⁷
- smaller practices and therefore fewer colleagues providing peer support²⁴⁸
- lack of suitable mentors for graduate and newly practising vets²⁴⁹
- increased 'self-efficacy' of primary producers, leading to a lower engagement with veterinary services.²⁵⁰

4.3 Dr Gundula Rhoades discussed many of these issues in her evidence to the committee. Her experiences are explored in the case study below.

Case study – Dr Gundula Rhoades, Gowrie Vet Clinic, Inverell²⁵¹

Since 2002 Dr Gundula Rhoades has been the owner and operator of Gowrie Vet Clinic in Inverell in northern New South Wales. Dr Rhoades employs four veterinarians and five nursing, reception and office staff, all of whom are female.

The clinic incorporates a purpose built hospital, including a clinic building for small animals, paddocks for horses, holding yards, and examination areas for horses.

According to Dr Rhoades being a vet is wonderful, but being a country veterinarian is physically and mentally demanding. Indeed, for the first ten years she was on call every weekend and every night.

Dr Rhoades identified some of challenges for the industry, including attrition, financial pressures and fear of being sued. She has also found it particularly difficult to recruit veterinarians. For a 12 month period she ran the clinic on her own, after 'one veterinarian left to go back to Sydney for personal reasons, another one had a terrible car accident while driving to a patient at night, leaving her unable to work for two years; one went on maternity leave'. This led to Dr Rhoades burning out and the breakdown of her relationship.

Dr Rhoades is looking for a partner or buyer for the clinic. However, like other practices, she has found that younger vets are not interested.

4.4 Stakeholders noted that the public sector has also found it difficult to recruit vets into regional areas. Mr Rob Kelly, Executive Director, Regional Delivery, NSW Local Land Services, advised of a shortage vets employed by the government, predominantly in the western region which covers about 40 per cent of the state. Mr Kelly stated: 'They are currently without a full-time vet out there. We're covering that either by utilising local vets on a contract basis or by servicing it from other regions'.²⁵²

4.5 Despite good employment conditions for government vets, shortages have meant private roles can offer higher salaries which cannot be matched under the Local Land Services vet award.

²⁴⁷ Submission 74a, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 45; Submission 47, Name suppressed, p 1.

²⁴⁸ Submission 83, Kookaburra Veterinary Employment, p 2; Submission 75, Name suppressed, p 1.

²⁴⁹ Evidence, Dr Robyn Alders AO, Member, NSW Farmers Association, 29 August 2023, p 61.

²⁵⁰ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 44.

²⁵¹ Submission 28, Dr Gundula Rhoades, pp 1-5.

²⁵² Evidence, Mr Rob Kelly, Executive Director, Regional Delivery, Local Land Services, Department of Regional NSW, 30 August 2023, p 50.

Local Land Services has started looking at other ways to attract vets to the regions, including a graduate program and offering work placements to students.²⁵³

4.6 Inquiry participants told the committee that the compounding effect of these challenges is that rural and regional vet practices are closing.²⁵⁴ The lack of vet practices in rural and regional areas presents a barrier for pet owners to access care for their animals and is discussed in Chapter 7.

4.7 There was widespread support for targeted action to attract vets to rural and regional areas. The Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand submission noted its independent review had included at least two recommendations to improve the supply of young vets in rural areas, specifically:

Veterinary schools consider supplementing the mainstream admission process with an additional entry pathway targeting applicants committed to rural and/or government veterinary practice, subject to demand.

The Australian Government extend to veterinarians the student debt relief provided to doctors and nurse practitioners who live and work in rural and remote Australia, via a rural veterinary bonding scheme.²⁵⁵

4.8 These recommendations were reflected in the evidence from the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA).²⁵⁶ In particular, the AVA recommended:

Recommendation 8: The NSW Government Veterinary professionals are extended the same opportunities as other professions that are being encouraged to move to regional rural and remote areas.

Recommendation 15: The NSW Government considers funding around educational fee relief to encourage early career veterinarians to work in rural NSW.

Recommendation 16: The NSW Government includes veterinarians in existing mechanisms to sustain medical and paramedical workers in rural areas of NSW.²⁵⁷

4.9 A number of stakeholders concurred with these recommendations.²⁵⁸

4.10 Similarly, Dr Geoffrey Dutton, Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University, stated that the NSW Government could offer

²⁵³ Evidence, Mr Kelly, 30 August 2023, p 51.

²⁵⁴ Submission 136, Dr Deborah Neutze, p 2; Submission 173, Name suppressed, p 1.

²⁵⁵ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, pp 3 and 5.

²⁵⁶ Evidence, Dr Cristy Secombe, Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs, Australian Veterinary Association, 30 August 2023, p 44.

²⁵⁷ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 46 and 58.

²⁵⁸ Answers to questions on notice, Dr Debbie Neutze, 7 September 2023, pp 1 and 2; Answers to questions on notice, Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel, 14 September 2023, pp 3 and 4; questions on notice, Dr Georgia Ladmore, 19 September 2023, p 2; Answers to questions on notice, VetPartners, 20 September 2023, p 1.

scholarships and cadetships requiring the recipient to remain for at least two years working in a rural area.²⁵⁹

- 4.11** Mr Tim Payne, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President, the University of Sydney, suggested developing a workforce strategy for veterinarians similar to those available for teaching and medicine, plus consideration of state and commonwealth funding to support students in regional placements.²⁶⁰

Large animals

- 4.12** Large animal practice generally comprises on-farm services for livestock, including dairy or beef cattle, sheep, and horses. Other services for large animals include:

- on-plant veterinarians employed by the Australian Government in abattoirs, responsible for the certification of meat for export to international markets²⁶¹
- district veterinarians employed by the NSW Local Land Services who provide advice to land managers and the community on biosecurity and animal health issues, and undertake activities related to prevention, preparedness, detection, and response to emergency animal diseases²⁶²
- veterinary pathologists working in veterinary laboratories services, which provide pathology and diagnostic testing for animal disease.²⁶³

Livestock producers

- 4.13** As outlined in Chapter 1, rural mixed practices are increasingly reliant on small animal practice to ensure their viability.²⁶⁴ Dr Geoffrey Titmarsh, a part owner of a veterinary practice he established in 1976, discussed some of the changes and challenges of large animal practice:

... after nearly 50 years of servicing all animals, [the practice] now provides small animal services, with the occasional sheep, goat, calf, alpaca, or other service (mostly by me). The younger vets are not interested in providing larger animal services. At nearly 73, I gave myself a leave pass on horses and cattle a couple of years ago. It takes so long per outside large animal call, that with our overheads, it becomes uneconomic. Especially when you are so busy that you cannot fit it in.²⁶⁵

²⁵⁹ Evidence, Dr Geoffrey Dutton, Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University, 30 August 2023, p 15.

²⁶⁰ Evidence, Mr Tim Payne, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Sydney, 30 August 2023, p 16.

²⁶¹ Submission 193, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, p 3.

²⁶² Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 24.

²⁶³ Submission 80, Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology, p 3. Note, pathologists also test for diseases in all animal species.

²⁶⁴ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 45.

²⁶⁵ Submission 194, Jeffrey Titmarsh, pp 1-2.

- 4.14** The committee heard that treating large animals presents specific challenges for vet practices, including that:
- there are few current graduates that have an adequate understanding of large animal medicine, herd health and the role of livestock in sustainable food and fibre production in Australia²⁶⁶
 - producers are increasingly self-sufficient, for example, drug deregulation has allowed some drugs to be sold in stock stores²⁶⁷
 - large animal vets are usually used in a 'reactive' manner to treat sick animals, rather than being proactively engaged for preventative measures such as herd health and nutrition²⁶⁸
 - the financial cost of intervention for individual animals on farms may outweigh the value of the animal concerned thus veterinary assistance tends to be selective²⁶⁹
 - the low demand for veterinary services by livestock producers has meant that large animal practices are less sustainable, and likely to close.²⁷⁰
 - some producers have not had a veterinarian on farm for a number of years.²⁷¹
- 4.15** The committee received limited evidence from individual producers. However, those that did contribute were highly supportive of their local veterinary services and concerned about the heavy work burden they faced. Mr Henry Burr ridge stated: 'at the moment we're quite blessed to have a good group of vets and a good vet clinic but I'm probably concerned about where it goes ... as all these vets get older and look at retirement'.²⁷²
- 4.16** It was noted that the decreasing demand for large animal veterinarians and the ageing workforce may hinder the development of the next generation of large animal practitioners.²⁷³ Challenges for universities and students are discussed in Chapter 5.

Meat export industry

- 4.17** The meat export industry requires an on-plant veterinarian, employed by the Australian Government, to be present in an abattoir for meat being prepared for export to some countries. The committee heard that with demanding conditions and many abattoirs in rural and remote locations, it can be difficult to recruit veterinarians.²⁷⁴
- 4.18** As noted in previous chapters, the Australian Government often relies on overseas qualified veterinarians, with a restricted or limited registration, to carry out this work.

²⁶⁶ Submission 209, NSW Farmers Association, p 2.

²⁶⁷ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 44.

²⁶⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 44.

²⁶⁹ Submission 108, Dr Rodney Reece, p 3.

²⁷⁰ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 7.

²⁷¹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 44.

²⁷² Evidence, Mr Henry Burr ridge, Primary Producer, 14 December 2023, p 12.

²⁷³ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 45.

²⁷⁴ Submission 193, Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, p 5.

District veterinarians, bio-surveillance and emergency animal disease response

- 4.19** In New South Wales, the NSW Local Land Services authority employs District Veterinarians to provide advice to livestock managers; they also have a critical role in disease surveillance on farm, in sale yards and animal production; and in natural disaster responses.²⁷⁵
- 4.20** In addition, the NSW Department of Primary Industries employs veterinarians who work on animal and biosecurity policy, working with producers and undertaking risk assessments. These individuals report to the Chief Veterinary Officer.²⁷⁶
- 4.21** A veterinarian, who has worked for both Local Land Services and the Department of Primary Industries, noted that the shortage of private veterinary practitioners has put extra pressure on the government employed veterinarians. They noted that farmers will call the Emergency Animal Disease hotline for routine questions that would normally be dealt with by private veterinarians.²⁷⁷
- 4.22** The AVA also noted that shortages of private livestock veterinarians in rural areas has led to some producers requesting Local Land Services veterinarians to provide treatments, which they are not equipped for, nor is it their role.²⁷⁸
- 4.23** Dr Alders from the NSW Farmers Association indicated that continuing natural disasters and biosecurity threats have resulted in Local Land Services veterinarians relieving Department of Primary Industry veterinarians. This means that livestock producers have not had access to the Local Land Services veterinarians, putting at risk investigations into potential livestock disease.²⁷⁹
- 4.24** NSW Farmers Association stated that there are a limited number of veterinarians with the skills, knowledge, and experience to effectively manage a significant outbreak, and that government should consider financial incentives to support veterinary businesses, including strategies to maintain out of hours services.²⁸⁰
- 4.25** Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, Department of Primary Industries, advised that the government's role in disease surveillance has not been compromised due to veterinary shortages. He recounted assistance being provided from other states during a disease outbreak and cooperation with industry partners. Mr Hansen acknowledged that there are not as many available veterinarians as there used to be, but that the service was adapting to the situation.²⁸¹

²⁷⁵ Evidence, Mr Kelly, 30 August 2023, p 49.

²⁷⁶ Evidence, Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries, 30 August 2023, p 49.

²⁷⁷ Submission 134, Name suppressed, p 3.

²⁷⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 24.

²⁷⁹ Evidence, Dr Alders, 29 August 2023, p 55.

²⁸⁰ Submission 209, NSW Farmers Association, p 4.

²⁸¹ Evidence, Mr Hansen, 30 August 2023, p 54.

Diagnostic services for animal pathology

- 4.26** In addition to providing clinical care, veterinarians may work in related health services, such as animal pathology. The Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology described the importance of veterinary pathology:

The discipline of veterinary pathology is central to the accurate diagnosis of animal disease. It underpins Australia's preparedness for emergency animal disease, enables control of endemic disease, protects public health, supports biodiversity, and contributes to ensuring biosecurity.²⁸²

- 4.27** The society explained that there is a growing shortage, which creates barriers as delays in diagnoses can affect treatment and responses to emergency animal disease.²⁸³
- 4.28** Additionally, the Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology noted in their written submission that there is now only one government veterinary laboratory in New South Wales, following closures of other laboratories in 1996 and 2009. The society expressed concern that there are not enough pathologists available to increase output and adequately respond during emergency animal diseases, or meet the day to day diagnostic needs of the veterinary profession.²⁸⁴ The AVA likewise mentioned that the workforce has contracted, due to retirement and a lack of training positions.²⁸⁵
- 4.29** Mr Hansen from the Department of Primary Industries indicated that some additional capacity in diagnostic services has been accessed through partnerships with universities and private veterinarians, such as requesting samples to be sent to the services, rather than being collected in the field by the government veterinarians.²⁸⁶

Equine veterinarians

- 4.30** The committee did not receive submissions from representatives of the equine industry. However, there was ample evidence from other stakeholders that there is a shortage of veterinarians specialising in horses.
- 4.31** Goulburn Valley Equine Hospital, located in Victoria, indicated that there is a shortage of equine veterinarians, which impacts its ability to provide out of hours care, which directly impacts animal welfare.²⁸⁷ This hospital observed that similar issues are likely being faced in New South Wales and noted its reliance on employing overseas trained veterinarians.²⁸⁸

²⁸² Submission 80, Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology, p 3.

²⁸³ Submission 80, Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology, p 3.

²⁸⁴ Submission 80, Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology, pp 3 and 4.

²⁸⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, pp 26-27.

²⁸⁶ Evidence, Mr Hansen, 30 August 2023, p 50.

²⁸⁷ Submission 32, Goulburn Valley Equine Hospital, p 1.

²⁸⁸ Submission 32, Goulburn Valley Equine Hospital, p 1.

- 4.32** Similarly, the Hunter Equine Centre reported that its hospital has had no Australian veterinarians applying for roles in recent years, and they have difficulty recruiting overseas veterinarians whose degrees are not recognised.²⁸⁹
- 4.33** In his submission, Dr Ken Jacobs considered the nature of equine veterinary practice was not conducive to attracting and retaining graduate veterinarians. This is in part due to the increased specialisation of equine practice and poor mentoring of graduates.²⁹⁰

Emergency response situations

- 4.34** Stakeholders told the committee that the recent fire and flood emergencies across Australia have highlighted the essential role expected of vets in caring for injured animals.²⁹¹ Despite this, inquiry participants suggested that there was no clear pathway to organise vets who undertake emergency response work.
- 4.35** Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, reported that during the 2019-20 bushfires, while there were many volunteer organisations and vets on hand, the approach to emergency services provision was uncoordinated, and veterinarians did not have the skills to deal with injured wildlife.²⁹²
- 4.36** The NSW Government advised that an emergency response framework for using vets has been greatly improved since the flood emergency in 2022. Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries, described how the contribution of private vets was incorporated into emergency response plans, noting that they undergo specific training and are added to the register for emergency vets. If deployed, these vets are paid for their time and compensated for any costs.²⁹³
- 4.37** Mr Hansen noted that in some emergency situations out-of-area vets were providing assistance that the department was not aware of until after the event. In the case of the North Coast floods there was a special provision where vets could provide up to \$10,000 of treatment without prior approval from the NSW Government and still be repaid.²⁹⁴
- 4.38** Mr Kelly from the Department of Regional NSW indicated to the committee that the district vets employed by Local Land Services also play a role in natural disaster responses such as doing animal welfare checks, assessments, and assisting with euthanasia.²⁹⁵

²⁸⁹ Submission 31, Hunter Valley Equine Centre, p 1.

²⁹⁰ Submission 117, Dr Ken Jacobs, p 9.

²⁹¹ Submission 136, Dr Deborah Neutze, p 2.

²⁹² Evidence, Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, 29 August 2023, p 36.

²⁹³ Evidence, Mr Hansen, 30 August 2023, p 57.

²⁹⁴ Evidence, Mr Hansen, 30 August 2023, pp 57 and 58.

²⁹⁵ Evidence, Mr Kelly, 30 August 2023, p 50.

Committee comment

- 4.39 The committee observes that many of the challenges faced in rural and regional areas are similar to those faced by all veterinarians. However, we find that there are specific additional challenges that hinder service provision and the availability of veterinary practices in these areas, including, but not limited to, the tyranny of distance, difficulties recruiting and retaining vets, particularly for large animal work, and the lack of engagement by primary producers.

Finding 12

That veterinarians in rural and regional areas face additional challenges to their counterparts in the major cities, including:

- difficulties in providing after-hours coverage
- large distances to be travelled to visit clients on farm
- difficulty recruiting and retaining veterinarians, particularly for large animal work
- difficulty finding a buyer for their practice
- difficulty finding suitable housing
- a lack of mentors, particularly for newly graduated vets
- a lack of engagement with their services by primary producers.

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- 4.40 The committee notes the difficulties of recruiting and retaining veterinarians to work in areas outside major cities and notes that this situation is not unique to the veterinary profession. A number of submissions and witnesses put forward suggestions of student loan (HECS debt) forgiveness and other support for veterinarians generally, but particularly for those willing to work in the regions, similar to that already in place to attract other professions to these areas.

- 4.41 The committee was concerned that despite the growth in demand for small animal services there were still shortages in the regions, even to the point of some towns having no veterinary practice.

- 4.42 The committee recommends that the NSW Government considers providing financial incentives for veterinarians who work with livestock, to ensure an adequate number of large animal practitioners are available to support primary producers in regional areas.

Recommendation 15

That the NSW Government considers providing financial incentives for veterinarians who work with livestock, to ensure an adequate number of large animal practitioners are available to support primary producers in regional areas.

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- 4.43 It was not clear to the committee, however, that student debt forgiveness alone will necessarily lead to more vets working in large animal practice, or relocating to the regions. There was convincing evidence that graduates are less willing to work in large animal practice. Moreover, the shortage of professionals in the regions is not unique to the veterinary profession; areas outside the large cities have struggled to recruit medical professionals and teachers for many years.

- 4.44** In addition, there was scant evidence put to the committee by primary producers expressing concerns about access to veterinary care. However, we note that fewer large animal vets in the regions means fewer opportunities for vets to be on farms to detect diseases that could put production industries at risk. Therefore, the committee recommends that the NSW Government advocate for the Australian Government to trial incentives, including waiving HECS debt, to attract and retain veterinarians in New South Wales, and particularly in rural and in regional areas.
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Recommendation 16

That the NSW Government advocate for the Australian Government to trial incentives, including waiving HECS debt, to attract and retain veterinarians in New South Wales, and particularly in rural and in regional areas.

- 4.45** There was also evidence put to the committee that early career vets were not getting the support they needed from their employer in order to develop their skills and thrive in their roles. There was discussion from witnesses about the need for better mentoring new graduates, particularly in rural and regional areas. To this end, the committee recommends that the NSW Government provide funding for targeted grants to enhance mentoring for first year graduates in private practice in New South Wales, and particularly in areas outside of large cities.
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Recommendation 17

That the NSW Government provide funding for targeted grants to enhance mentoring for first year graduates in private practice in New South Wales, and particularly in areas outside of large cities.

- 4.46** We acknowledge the challenges for veterinary professionals locating to regional and rural areas, and stakeholders' proposals to use incentives to entice individuals to the regions, similar to those used for attracting teachers and medical professionals. The committee considers this suggestion has strong merit, particularly with respect to NSW Government veterinarians. The committee recommends that the NSW Government to consider providing financial incentives for veterinarians to take up NSW Local Land Service veterinary roles in regions where recruitment has been difficult.
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Recommendation 18

That the NSW Government to consider providing incentives for veterinarians to take up NSW Local Land Service veterinary roles in regions where recruitment has been difficult.

- 4.47** While there were some examples provided to the committee concerning areas with no existing veterinary clinic, there was little evidence provided to assist the committee to make a recommendation to ensure targeted support could be provided in regions underserved by veterinarians. In the short to medium term, there may be other mechanisms, including telehealth and mobile veterinary clinics, to assist with filling the gap. The issues concerning these services are discussed in Chapter 2.
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- 4.48** The committee notes the reluctance of livestock producers to engage with veterinary services, and an apparent divergence between the skills sought by livestock producers and those taught in universities. This is an area of particular concern to the veterinary industry and the university sector. However, we received little evidence from primary producers themselves. In saying this, we strongly encourage primary producers to proactively engage with their local veterinarians to assist in managing their livestock and bio-surveillance.
- 4.49** We note the suggestion that the veterinary science curriculum could be better suited to the modern needs of primary production. The Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ) has recently reviewed the curricula of veterinary schools and made recommendations to address this issue, which the VSANZ advises are in the process of being implemented. This issue is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5 which examines the challenges for universities.
- 4.50** The committee learned that in the event of a medium-scale emergency disease outbreak, the Department of Primary Industries would partner with the private veterinary pathology services workforce and other jurisdictions as required, to increase response capacity. The NSW Department of Primary Industries collaborates with universities and the private sector, particularly in an emergency response. In the event of a biosecurity threat the committee seeks assurance from the NSW Government that there is sufficient workforce of veterinary pathologists and the necessary infrastructure to meet future demands for services, including in the event of an emergency animal disease outbreak. Specially, we recommend that the NSW Government conduct an assessment of the capacity of the government veterinary diagnostic services workforce, in particular veterinary pathologists, to respond to an emergency animal disease outbreak and to also meet projected future demands for diagnostic services. This assessment should be publicly released.

Recommendation 19

That the NSW Government conduct an assessment of the capacity of the government veterinary diagnostic services workforce, in particular veterinary pathologists, to respond to an emergency animal disease outbreak and to also meet projected future demands for diagnostic services. This assessment should be publicly released.

- 4.51** Once again, with regard to the shortage of equine veterinarians, there was limited evidence to the committee to support specific findings or recommendations. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, we noted the work of the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW to create pathways for registration of overseas trained equine specialists to come and work in Australia.
- 4.52** The committee acknowledges the important work of veterinarians in emergency response situations such as floods and bushfires. The evidence to the committee from the Department of Primary Industries noted that the NSW Government, having learnt from recent natural disasters, is working to implement a framework to train, register, deploy and compensate vets who assist in these situations.

Chapter 5 Universities and veterinary science students

This chapter relates to the supply side of the veterinarian workforce. It outlines the barriers and constraints for universities and students. Challenges for universities include recruitment of academic staff and the cost intensive nature of these degrees. Issues relating to students include selection for admission to study veterinary science and preparedness for the workplace. Many of these concerns have been canvassed in a recent review commissioned by the peak body for veterinary schools in Australasia, the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand.

Recognised veterinary science degrees in New South Wales

- 5.1** As discussed in Chapter 1, the first step to becoming a registered, or practising, veterinarian is to complete a veterinary science degree recognised by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC), the national accreditation body. A person with a veterinary science degree that is not recognised in Australia will need to pass the Australasian Veterinary Examination administered by the AVBC.²⁹⁶
- 5.2** The AVBC recognises the veterinary science courses offered at eight universities in Australasia, including those provided by the University of Sydney and Charles Sturt University in New South Wales. The courses offered by these two universities are discussed in the case studies below.

Case study - Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney²⁹⁷

The Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney offers a six year course leading to a combined Bachelor of Veterinary Biology/Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM). The four year DVM can also be taken after completion of another suitable undergraduate degree.

The school has campuses in Camperdown and Camden. It also has teaching hospitals on both campuses, including a dedicated wildlife hospital in Camden. Additionally, the Camden campus provides students access to large animal practice, including horses, sheep and cattle.

The school employs 80 veterinarians, including veterinarians with higher research degrees and registered veterinary specialists in a variety of clinical disciplines including small animal medicine, equine sports medicine, and ruminant health. However, the university has lost many staff to the private sector in recent years.

There is a large component of work integrated learning for students. From about year two of the DVM, students go to placements on farms and in practices. In the final year students spend 20 weeks in external practices.

In third year, there is a dedicated unit of study relating to veterinary practice management. The university also introduced changes to the curriculum in 2015 to increase content on resilience, self-care, ethics, welfare, work/life balance, and communication.

²⁹⁶ Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013, Section 8.

²⁹⁷ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science; University of Sydney, *Rethinking Veterinary Education: Securing Australasia's future in biosecurity, food production, One Health and animal welfare*, https://vsanz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VSANZ_Rethinking-Vet-Ed_Low-Res-FINAL-CLEAN.pdf, p 21; Evidence, Professor Jacqueline Norris, Dean and Head of School, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, 30 August 2023, p 19; Answers to Questions on Notice, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, 28 September 2023, p 3.

There are approximately 120 DVM graduates each year, approximately a third of which are full-fee paying students from overseas. However, these figures vary due to effect of COVID-19 on students' ability to enter and leave Australia. The dropout rate from the veterinary science degrees is approximately 1-3 per cent. Over the five years from 2019 to 2023, nearly 12 per cent of students enrolled in the DVM were from regional and remote areas.

The school notes that admission numbers are limited due financial constraints around the delivery of courses and the capacity of the current teaching hospitals to host students. The school is currently rebuilding its teaching hospitals which will increase its capacity.

Case study – School of Veterinary Sciences, Charles Sturt University²⁹⁸

The School of Veterinary Sciences at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, offers a six year course that leads to a Bachelor of Veterinary Biology and a Bachelor of Veterinary Science. The university takes on 60 to 68 students per year. Approximately 60 students graduate each year.

The number of students admitted to the course is limited by the cost to the university of providing the degree and the clinical training capacity. Veterinary science degrees are expensive due to high staff student ratios, the need to train across many animal species, clinical practice requirements and the need for highly specialised medical equipment.

A key aspect of learning for students takes place via work integrated learning. The nature of work integrated learning for veterinary students adapts as they progress through their course; it typically starts as observation, progressing to assisting clinicians, and later to carrying out simple procedures under approved supervision. The school uses a combined delivery model with students spending some time in embedded clinics and the remainder in external practices.

Embedded clinics are those onsite at the university. Embedded clinics can benefit the community as they provide access to high quality care, with services offered by students often provided at lower rates. However, teaching students while offering a clinical service reduces the case load of the clinic and therefore reduces income, meaning university clinics are not necessarily commercially viable.

The school noted that when teaching is provided in an external clinic, it is harder to ensure the quality of supervision. In some cases, the clinic is paid to provide educational services. Clinics do gain benefits from additional assistance provided by students, particularly those in the final years of their degree. It can be difficult to find private clinical placements in rural, regional and remote areas.

Veterinary degrees are also expensive for students as they must fund their travel to gain clinical experience during their degrees, at the same time as they are generating a large HECS debt over at least 5 years of study.

Veterinary students also participate in a week-long course called 'transition to practice' where business professionals provide guidance on establishing and operating their own business.

The school notes that more than 85 per cent of the university's veterinary science students who are based in a rural, regional or remote location stay in these areas after graduation.

The school also offers technical courses for veterinary paraprofessionals. These courses are discussed in Chapter 6.

²⁹⁸ Submission 200, Charles Sturt University, pp 1-7; *Rethinking Veterinary Education: Securing Australasia's future in biosecurity, food production, One Health and animal welfare*, https://vsanz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VSANZ_Rethinking-Vet-Ed_Low-Res-FINAL-CLEAN.pdf, p 22; Evidence, Dr Geoffrey Dutton, Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University, 30 August 2023, pp 18 and 19.

- 5.3 Southern Cross University in northern New South Wales will introduce a veterinary science degree in 2025. The first cohort of 40 students is expected to graduate at the end of 2029.²⁹⁹
- 5.4 A number of overseas veterinary science courses are also recognised by the AVBC. In general, these are degrees from universities in the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand and South Africa. Graduates with these degrees follow a similar registration path as those who graduate from Australian universities.³⁰⁰
- 5.5 The AVBC is considering options to increase the number of recognised veterinary science degrees. For example, its strategic plan includes work on recognition of European degrees.³⁰¹ The AVBC also discussed its mentoring work to help establish the ASEAN Veterinary Statutory Bodies Network. The AVBC told the committee that the City University Hong Kong will be the first Asian veterinary school to be accredited by them with more schools anticipated to be accredited 'in the coming years'.³⁰²

Difficulties delivering veterinary science degrees

- 5.6 In the course of the inquiry the committee heard evidence from representatives of the two veterinary schools in New South Wales, the University of Sydney and Charles Sturt University, and from Southern Cross University which intends to enrol its first veterinary students in 2025.
- 5.7 Challenges for universities include recruiting suitably qualified teaching staff, the high cost of delivering veterinary courses, and selecting suitable candidates for entry into the courses.
- 5.8 In 2022, the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ), the peak body for universities delivering accredited veterinary courses in Australia and New Zealand, commissioned an independent review of the veterinary science education capability of both nations. The report *Rethinking Veterinary Education* found that 'veterinary education is at a crisis point in Australasia, with inadequate funding to meet the costs of a very expensive teaching program, in the face of deteriorating wellbeing amongst students, staff, and graduates'.³⁰³ The findings and recommendations of this report are discussed throughout the following sections.

Recruitment of teaching staff

- 5.9 The committee heard that veterinary schools across Australia are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain academic staff. The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) attributed this concern to two broad factors:
- workplace conditions such as budgetary pressures on universities and the need to teach an increasingly complex curriculum while also undertaking research

²⁹⁹ Submission 140, Southern Cross University, p 1.

³⁰⁰ Evidence, Dr Steven Ferguson, President, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 30 August, p 30.

³⁰¹ Evidence, Dr Julie Strous, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, 30 August 2023, p 30.

³⁰² Submission 189 Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, pp 9-10.

³⁰³ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 2.

- increasing opportunities in the private sector for specialist veterinarians, particularly in specialist veterinary clinics, with better pay and conditions than universities can offer.³⁰⁴

5.10 Both veterinary schools in New South Wales raised similar concerns.³⁰⁵ For example, the School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney employs approximately 80 staff, including those with specialist qualifications, to deliver its courses. The school reported that there had been an 'exodus' of specialists from the university into private practice. Consequently, there were negative impacts on the school's ability to teach some of its veterinary training programs, conduct its clinical research projects, and the ceasing of some specialist training programs.³⁰⁶

5.11 Additionally, the University of Sydney stated that recruiting overseas trained veterinarians for staff roles can be hindered by the significant waiting time for visas. The university said it had experienced at least one highly suitable candidate withdrawing their application due to the delays in obtaining a working visa.³⁰⁷ Overseas trained vets are discussed in Chapter 2.

5.12 Charles Sturt University echoed this noting difficulties recruiting 'veterinarians able and willing to teach as well as practice for the past decade ... making the delivery of veterinary curricula increasingly challenging, particularly in on-site clinical settings'.³⁰⁸

The cost of delivering veterinary science courses

5.13 There was discussion during the inquiry about the significant cost of veterinary science degrees. Accreditation requirements for university courses specify that students graduate with knowledge and expertise in all domestic animal species. This is despite graduates generally going on to practice in a limited field, such as only small animals.

5.14 The table below provides an approximation of the cost of providing a degree per student, per year, based on evidence from the University of Sydney, incorporating Australian Government Department of Education information.

³⁰⁴ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 25.

³⁰⁵ Evidence, Professor Norris, 30 August 2023, p 16; Submission 200, Charles Sturt University Faculty of Science and Health, p 4.

³⁰⁶ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, p 3.

³⁰⁷ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, p 4.

³⁰⁸ Submission 200, Faculty of Health and Science, Charles Sturt University, p 4.

Table 1 Funding and estimated shortfall for delivery of veterinary science degrees for domestic students

	Maximum student contribution ³⁰⁹	Commonwealth contribution ³¹⁰	Estimated shortfall per student ³¹¹
Per student	\$11,800	\$28,196	\$20,000

5.15 Inquiry participants attributed the high cost of veterinary science degrees to various factors including:

- the need to run expensive herds of animals, such as horse, sheep and cattle, for teaching purposes
- the high cost of clinical teaching
- low student to teacher ratios.³¹²

5.16 In addition to Commonwealth funding, the committee heard that the University of Sydney and Charles Sturt University use a mix of funding options to run their courses including full fee paying students and cross-subsidies from other degrees.³¹³ Mr Tim Payne, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President, The University of Sydney, noted the decision to cross subsidise the course is in part due to the importance of the veterinary industry to biosecurity.³¹⁴

5.17 The Sydney School of Veterinary Science has suggested that there be a change from graduating 'the 'omnicompetent veterinarian' trained equally across all domestic species' to allow for better resource allocation, noting:

- 'tracking' or 'streaming' allows students to choose areas of focus for study in the third and fourth years of the degree following a common core in years one and two
- streaming is common in other countries
- regulatory restrictions from the accrediting body, the AVBC, means streaming is currently not an option for Australian veterinary schools.³¹⁵

³⁰⁹ Correspondence from Mr Tim Payne, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Sydney, to secretariat, 8 September 2023, p 4.

³¹⁰ Correspondence from Mr Payne, to secretariat, 8 September 2023, p 4.

³¹¹ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, p 3.

³¹² Evidence, Dr Dutton, 30 August 2023, p 17; Evidence, Professor Shane Raidal, Professor in Veterinary Pathobiology, Charles Sturt University, 4 April 2024, p 9.

³¹³ Evidence, Professor Norris, 30 August 2023, pp 14 and 15; Evidence, Mr Tim Payne, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Sydney, 30 August 2023, p 16; Evidence, Dr Dutton, 30 August 2023, p 17.

³¹⁴ Evidence, Mr Payne, 30 August 2023, p 16.

³¹⁵ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science p 9.

- 5.18** This is reflected in the findings of the VSANZ report (2022) which found that funding to veterinary schools is inadequate to meet the costs of teaching the degree.³¹⁶ The report made a number of recommendations to address the high cost of delivering degrees, including:
- that the AVBC, along with veterinary schools, review the accreditation process to improve cost-effectiveness and efficiency of course delivery:
 - 'to remove requirements that duplicate the many other accountability and quality assurance processes of Australasian universities'
 - 'review the necessity and cost-effectiveness of each accreditation requirement in the light of the desired learning outcomes'
 - 'accelerate the transition from assessing teaching inputs to assessing learning outcomes as the principal basis for accreditation of veterinary programs'.
 - calling on the Australian Government to increase the funding rate per veterinary student by at least 30 per cent.³¹⁷

Selection of candidates for entry into veterinary courses

- 5.19** There was some concern amongst stakeholders as to whether the students who gain entry to veterinary science courses are suitable for the challenges of the profession. Indeed, certain submissions from individual vets, particularly those who had been in the profession for many decades, suggested that universities need to select students that are better suited to the 'rigours' of veterinary practice.³¹⁸
- 5.20** Inquiry participants were particularly concerned about the high academic marks required for veterinary science courses.³¹⁹ Dr Sandra Hodgins, Senior Veterinarian, Hospital Superintendent and Director, Summer Hill Village Vet, expressed concern about the academic benchmark for entry to veterinary courses. Dr Hodgins suggested it would be worthwhile to include selection criteria such as willingness to work with large animals, and an understanding of how to relate to pet owners.³²⁰ Mr Mudher Al-Rahmani, Practice Manager, Vets for Pets, echoed this view, outlining the experiences of a vet nurse in his practice from a regional area that cannot get into a veterinary school due to her mathematics mark.³²¹
- 5.21** In response to these concerns, the University of Sydney and Charles Sturt University outlined their admission processes for veterinary science courses. Both universities have a multi-step process and are not solely reliant on academic marks.
- 5.22** Professor Norris outlined the admissions process for the University of Sydney which included:
- appropriate academic marks

³¹⁶ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 2.

³¹⁷ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 4.

³¹⁸ Submission 208, Andrew Graham-Higgs, p 7; Submission 130, Dr Alan Fridley, p 1.

³¹⁹ See for example, Submission 17, Dr Timothy Mather, p 2; Submission 119, Dr Mary Nicoll, p 2.

³²⁰ Evidence, Dr Sandra Hodgins, Senior Veterinarian, Hospital Superintendent and Director, Summer Hill Village Vet, 29 August 2023, p 5.

³²¹ Evidence, Mr Mudher Al-Rahmani, Practice Manager, Vets for Pets, 29 August 2023, p 6

- consideration of the applicant's previous experience in veterinary practice, with a threshold of minimum four weeks of experience
- 'Casper', a situational judgement test.³²²

5.23 The university is also considering prospective student interviews in addition to the above steps.³²³

5.24 Dr Dutton from Charles Sturt University outlined the process for admission to its veterinary course, which requires:

- an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) of 90, or 85 if from a regional area
- a written submission which shows a commitment to regional communities, veterinary science and animal production, and an understanding of rural practice
- work experience in a veterinary practice
- a written response to a topical question.³²⁴

5.25 The committee heard that Southern Cross University was yet to finalise its admission requirements. However, Professor Jon Hill, Executive Dean, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Southern Cross University, said the university will follow similar processes as the universities in New South Wales and internationally.³²⁵

5.26 Southern Cross University informed the committee that it plans to have '[an] admission process which focusses not just on academic excellence ... but which incorporates a focus on students with a demonstrated interest in rural and regional practice'. It also intends on offering degrees and diplomas in veterinary nursing.³²⁶

5.27 The independent review commissioned by the VSANZ recommended that veterinary schools widen their admissions process to select students 'on a broader range of excellence, equity and diversity' focusing beyond academic achievement.³²⁷

Obstacles faced by veterinary students

5.28 The committee heard that veterinary students face a range of challenges, including:

- ensuring they are 'job ready' following the completion of their degree
- acquiring significant debt from course fees and living costs
- additional barriers to entry and completion of degrees for rural and regional students

³²² Evidence, Professor Norris, 30 August 2023, p 17.

³²³ Evidence, Professor Norris, 30 August 2023, p 17.

³²⁴ Evidence, Dr Dutton, 30 August 2023, p 18.

³²⁵ Evidence, Professor Jon Hill, Executive Dean, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Southern Cross University, 20 August 2023, p 17.

³²⁶ Submission 140, Southern Cross University, Faculty of Science and Health, p 2.

³²⁷ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 3.

- concerns local students are being displaced by international fee paying students who leave the country once their degree is completed.

Preparedness of new graduates for veterinary practice

- 5.29** A recurring issue raised by inquiry participants was the 'job readiness' of newly graduated vets.³²⁸ Discussions included access to live animals while studying, profession-specific skill development, and the importance of enhancing students' communication skills.
- 5.30** The committee heard that it can be difficult for students to access live animals for training and development purposes. Professor Sharanne Raidal, Professor in Equine Medicine, Charles Sturt University, and Professor Shane Raidal, Professor in Veterinary Pathobiology, Charles Sturt University, discussed students' limited exposure to live animals during their degree, particularly:
- a decline in opportunities to develop skills in handling and carrying out procedures on live animals³²⁹
 - animal ethics requirements make it difficult to get approval for the use of live animals in teaching³³⁰
 - students recognise the importance of live animal skills but are understandably apprehensive about trying a procedure for the first time on a live animal with the client watching.³³¹
- 5.31** The professors also mentioned that is expensive for students to access clinical training. For example, students at Charles Sturt University have to travel to Victoria to get experience in dairy practice.³³²
- 5.32** Another concern was the lack of profession-specific skill development provided by university courses. A graduate of less than 10 years noted that in their first role as a veterinarian in general practice, they had difficulties performing tasks for the first time and had to ask a nurse to demonstrate a specific bandaging technique that had not been sufficiently covered at university. This vet also mentioned the unwillingness of colleagues to provide mentoring and support during their placement.³³³
- 5.33** NSW Farmers Association expressed concerns about whether graduates were adequately prepared for veterinary practice in rural and regional areas, stating that:
- there has been an increase in virtual learning as opposed to 'hands-on experience'
 - few current graduates understand large animal medicine

³²⁸ Submission 93, Dr Sandra Hodgins, p 1.

³²⁹ Evidence, Professor Sharanne Raidal, Professor in Equine Medicine, Charles Sturt University, 4 April 2024, p 10.

³³⁰ Evidence, Professor Shane Raidal, 4 April 2024, p 11.

³³¹ Evidence, Professor Sharanne Raidal, 4 April 2024, p 10.

³³² Evidence, Professor Shane Raidal, 4 April 2024, p 11.

³³³ Submission 74, Name suppressed, pp 4-5 and 7.

- there is little understanding of herd health and the role of livestock.³³⁴
- 5.34** Indeed, Professor Ian Lean, Member, NSW Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel, was of the view that a growing proportion of veterinary students have 'zero interest in agriculture'. He advocated for streaming degrees into large and small animal courses, saying that it would ensure that farmers 'will then see the people who want to learn about farms'.³³⁵
- 5.35** To this end, VSANZ supported the concept of 'tracking' or streaming to increase proficiency of new graduates and recommended: 'Veterinary schools progressively expand the proportion of the curriculum devoted to 'tracking' to produce new graduates with higher levels of proficiency (including technical skills) in their chosen early-career paths'.³³⁶
- 5.36** Alternatively, Mrs Caroline Winter, journalist and podcast creator, told the committee that students were well prepared in theory for the demands of the job. However, she noted that they found the reality of the workplace challenging. She described the experience of one student who found her placement ethically challenging which ultimately had a big impact on her mental health.³³⁷
- 5.37** Following on, Dr Jocelyn Birch Baker Consultant, Smooth Operating Vets and practice owner, discussed the importance of vet clinics being 'student ready'. She said that clinics need to be realistic about student and graduate capabilities, and be organised enough to support them. Dr Birch Baker noted that this cohort require mentoring and supervision, and ultimately time, from other clinic staff. She also emphasised the importance of good clinic culture for all vets employed there, not just students and recent graduates.³³⁸
- 5.38** Universities informed the committee of their actions to address these concerns and prepare students for the workplace. For example, Professor Norris noted the school's courses:
- expose students to the veterinary workplace as soon as possible during their degree³³⁹
 - require a student to spend 20 weeks working in a veterinary practice in the final year of their degree³⁴⁰
 - provide dedicated units of study focusing on wellness and mental health needs and mentoring programs³⁴¹
 - include course requirements to be competent in financial and practice management.³⁴²

³³⁴ Submission 209, NSW Farmers Association, p 2.

³³⁵ Evidence, Professor Ian Lean, Member, NSW Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel, 29 August 2023, p 59.

³³⁶ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 3.

³³⁷ Evidence, Mrs Caroline Winter, Journalist and creator of podcast series, 29 August 2023, p 18.

³³⁸ Evidence, Dr Jocelyn Birch Baker, Consultant, Smooth Operating Vets and practice owner, 29 August 2023, pp 20 and 23-24.

³³⁹ Evidence, Professor Hill, 30 August 2023, p 18.

³⁴⁰ Evidence, Professor Norris, 30 August 2023, p 19.

³⁴¹ Evidence, Professor Jacqueline Norris, Head of School and Dean of the School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, 30 August 2023, p 21.

³⁴² Correspondence, Professor Norris, 28 September 2023, p 2.

- 5.39** The VSANZ has accepted the recommendation of the independent review that accreditation and regulation bodies and professional associations 'work together to harmonise their graduate mentoring programs and consider making them mandatory'.³⁴³ This view was echoed in evidence from the Sydney School of Veterinary Science.³⁴⁴

The cost to students of studying a veterinary degree

- 5.40** Most often, students defer the costs of their veterinary science degree, and their debt accumulates over time and will be paid back once they graduate and earn income. The Australian Veterinary Association indicated the level of debt that veterinary students should anticipate once their course is completed:

- those in Commonwealth funded places graduate with a debt of approximately \$70,000 to \$80,000
- full fee-paying students (domestic or international) will accumulate a debt of up to \$300,000.³⁴⁵

- 5.41** The Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney indicated that domestic students in Commonwealth funded places graduate with a HECS debt of approximately \$50,000. This in addition any cost they may incur during the 40 weeks of clinical placements in their final year of study, which may require them to relocate. The school noted, in contrast to degrees in other health disciplines, these students do not receive government support during their placement. The school suggested that support could be provided in the form of financial bursaries, travel grants or accommodation support.³⁴⁶

- 5.42** The VSANZ review of veterinary education made a recommendation that there should be some government support for students during their placement, specifically that 'Governments consider providing a clinical training loading for a designated number of veterinary students' clinical training in priority areas'.³⁴⁷

Students from rural and regional areas

- 5.43** The committee heard that universities have sought to increase the number of students from rural and regional areas who are studying to become veterinarians, on the understanding that they are more likely to seek employment in the regions once they graduate. However, as these students need to live out of home in order to attend university, it can be challenging for them to thrive during their studies.

³⁴³ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 4.

³⁴⁴ Evidence, Professor Norris, 30 August 2023, p 14.

³⁴⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 31.

³⁴⁶ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 10. Note the difference in debts accrued reported by the university of Sydney and the Australian Veterinary Association. The AVA figure may include debts accrued to support living costs while on placements. The Sydney School of Veterinary Science explicitly excludes this from their estimated debt accrued.

³⁴⁷ Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 4.

- 5.44** The Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney told the committee that in 2023 approximately 13.75 per cent of students enrolled in its veterinary science course were from rural and regional areas. Additionally, the school reported an average of 11.6 per cent of enrolments over the last five years were from these areas.³⁴⁸ The school has committed to increase its intake of students from rural areas to more than 25 per cent. This is at the same time as creating around 12 scholarships, some of which will be worth up to \$40,000 to \$50,000 per year. Professor Norris stated that this will help provide support systems so that the students 'thrive'.³⁴⁹
- 5.45** The committee heard that Charles Sturt University has a larger number of rural and regional students. For example, in 2023, 33 of 62 students enrolled in veterinary science were from these areas.³⁵⁰ Dr Dutton from Charles Sturt University, noted that rural students often faced greater financial barriers than other students, especially due to having to live away from home. Dr Dutton suggested that financial pressures were the greatest contributor to students dropping out although the university provided support, for example by getting them income through jobs in local vet practices.³⁵¹
- 5.46** The review commissioned by the VSANZ included a recommendation that 'Veterinary schools consider supplementing the mainstream admission process with an additional entry pathway targeting applicants committed to rural and/or government veterinary practice, subject to demand'.³⁵²

International students studying veterinary science in Australia

- 5.47** A number of submissions were critical of the high proportion of places given to overseas, or full fee paying students, and expressed concerns that students left Australia once they had qualified.³⁵³
- 5.48** The committee heard that international students make up approximately a third of the students in an average year at the Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney. The university explained the importance of attracting international students to the veterinary science courses as they 'offset to some degree' the cost of providing domestic student places.³⁵⁴
- 5.49** Professor Norris disagreed with the assertion that international students leave country once they complete their course. Professor Norris noted that the university's survey of students one year after they graduate showed that between 50 and 75 per cent stay in Australia. She conceded, however, that information on these graduates is not collected beyond one year and suggested

³⁴⁸ Answer to question on notice, Professor Norris, University of Sydney, 28 September 2023, p 3.

³⁴⁹ Evidence, Professor Norris, 30 August 2023, p 17.

³⁵⁰ Answer to question on notice, Dr Dutton, 27 September 2023, p 2.

³⁵¹ Evidence, Dr Dutton, 30 August 2023, p 22.

³⁵² Submission 105, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, p 3.

³⁵³ Submission 77, Emeritus Professor Richard Whittington, p 1; Submission 103, Name suppressed, p 2.

³⁵⁴ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 8.

that there could be a national registration body that collected much more detailed data on graduate destinations over a longer time frame.³⁵⁵

Committee comment

- 5.50** The committee was fortunate to visit the Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney, and the School of Veterinary Sciences at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga. We thank the staff and students we met during these visits.
- 5.51** We note that universities face a number of challenges to deliver veterinary science degrees, including recruiting appropriately skilled staff; delivering a course that provides students with knowledge and skills to be an 'omnipotent' veterinarian; selecting suitable candidates for study; and making courses accessible to students from rural areas. Coupled to this was the high cost of delivering of veterinary science degrees, which places a financial burden on both universities and students.
- 5.52** The committee is concerned by the difficulties reported by the Sydney School of Veterinary Science in recruiting academic staff, which leads to issues about whether a third veterinary school in New South Wales will be sustainable. In particular, the committee understands there is competition from the private sector to employ veterinarians who may have otherwise considered a role in academia. While the recommendations below do not specifically seek to address this issue, the committee considers it is possible that additional resources and resource sharing models for universities may help ease the shortage in academic staff.
- 5.53** The evidence from the university sector indicated that their key challenges lie in ensuring they have adequate funding and appropriately qualified academic staff to continue to deliver university courses to a high standard. It was very clear that a high level of resources is required to ensure every single student has access to clinical and academic learning across all animal species. For example, each university maintains multiple herds, particularly of large animals such as horses, sheep and cows. These animals require space and staff to care for them. This leads the committee to agree with proposals for resource sharing between universities, and perhaps even 'tracking' or streaming of courses, so that students start to specialise before graduation.

Finding 13

That universities are encountering challenges in delivering veterinary science degrees to students, due to the high cost of delivery, and a shortage of academic staff. This also has an impact on students who are graduating with high student debts.

Finding 14

That further opportunities need to be provided for veterinary students and graduates to obtain an adequate understanding of large animal medicine.

³⁵⁵ Evidence, Professor Jacqueline Norris, Head of School and Dean of the School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, 30 August 2023, p 15.

- 5.54 The committee notes the recent review of veterinary education in Australasia, *Rethinking Veterinary Education*, commissioned by the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand. The recommendations of the review were supported by all veterinary schools, including those recommendations that aim to address the high cost of course delivery. The committee also supports these recommendations, and recommends the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate that veterinary schools and the accreditation body work together to action the recommendations of *Rethinking Veterinary Education* which would help reduce the cost of course delivery.

Recommendation 20

That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate that veterinary schools and the accreditation body work together to action the recommendations of *Rethinking Veterinary Education*, the recent review of veterinary education commissioned by the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, which would help reduce the cost of course delivery.

- 5.55 The committee is aware that it will take time to implement the recommendation above, so urges immediate action to increase funding to universities to assist them with the cost of delivering courses for students studying to become veterinarians. To this end, we recommend that the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for the Australian Government to increase its per student contribution to universities for students studying to become veterinarians.

Recommendation 21

That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for the Australian Government to increase its per student contribution to universities for students studying to become veterinarians.

- 5.56 The review, *Rethinking Veterinary Education*, also recommended that the Australian Government provide funding for clinical training for veterinary students training in priority areas. The committee strongly supports this recommendation as a means of encouraging students to acquire their skills, and concurs that large animal training should be targeted. We therefore recommend that the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for the Australian Government to provide funding for clinical training for veterinary students training in large animal practice.

Recommendation 22

That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for the Australian Government to provide funding for clinical training for veterinary students training in large animal practice.

- 5.57 Additionally, we note concerns that universities are not enrolling vet students who are suited to the realities veterinary practice. While at least one university uses an interview as part of its admission system and there are requirements for applicants to show they have work experience

in the industry, evidence suggests that academic marks are still used as the first 'cut' for determining the pool of potential students. The committee considers that using academic marks for this purpose may be removing highly suitable candidates from eligibility for veterinary studies.

- 5.58** The committee understands that universities are continually assessing their admission process to ensure students from a broad range of backgrounds, including from rural areas, are admitted. The committee notes there is currently little data collected on post graduate destinations beyond the first year out of university, which makes it difficult to determine 'what works' in selecting the students who will remain in the profession. We recommend that the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for universities to continue to review their student admission processes, to ensure that suitable candidates are chosen to study veterinary science.

Recommendation 23

That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for universities to continue to review their student admission processes, to ensure that suitable candidates are chosen to study veterinary science.

- 5.59** The committee accepts that current financial pressures on universities, and specifically veterinary schools, are one of the reasons that they may enroll a large proportion of international full fee-paying students. A reduction in the number of international students will not free up places for domestic students, unless the universities are provided with additional funding to replace forgone fees, or domestic students are full fee-paying students.
- 5.60** The committee also notes that better data collection, as recommended in Chapter 3, will provide more information over the long term on the proportion of these students that remain in Australia to contribute to the veterinary workforce. On this basis, the committee has no recommendations to make specifically relating to international students.

Chapter 6 **Veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians**

This chapter discusses allied animal health workers in the veterinary sector, with an emphasis those roles that support the clinical work of veterinarians. In Australia, these positions are usually filled by veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians.³⁵⁶ This chapter discusses the education and training pathways for these roles and challenges they face, including the lack of a regulatory framework.

Stakeholders generally included veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in discussions about qualifications; roles in clinical practice; and a regulatory framework. It should be noted, however, that veterinary technicians are generally understood to have a bachelor degree whereas veterinary nurse qualifications can range from a Certificate IV to a bachelor degree. This distinction becomes important when considering proposals for title protection and a regulatory framework.

Qualification pathways

- 6.1** There are various pathways for an individual to become a qualified veterinary nurse or veterinary technician via qualifications under the Australian Qualifications Framework ranging from a Certificate IV in veterinary nursing to bachelor degrees in veterinary nursing and veterinary technology.³⁵⁷
- 6.2** It is estimated there are approximately 1,000 bachelor degree qualified veterinary nurses and technicians across Australia, and almost 11,000 individuals employed as veterinary nurses.³⁵⁸ Despite nationally recognised qualification pathways, there is no legislated definition of a veterinary nurse or technician in New South Wales, or requirement to be registered (this requirement currently only exists in Western Australia). Consequently, there is no requirement for individuals who are employed as veterinary nurses or veterinary technicians to hold these qualifications.³⁵⁹

Veterinary nurses

- 6.3** There are a number of pathways to become a qualified veterinary nurse in Australia:
- nationally recognised vocational qualifications: Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing, diploma in nursing or an associate degree in nursing³⁶⁰
 - Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing (delivered by Melbourne Polytechnic in partnership with La Trobe University since 2018)³⁶¹

³⁵⁶ Note, veterinary technicians are sometimes referred to as veterinary technologists. For continuity this report uses veterinary technician.

³⁵⁷ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 3.

³⁵⁸ Submission 120, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education, p 4.

³⁵⁹ Submission 152, The Veterinary Nursing Research Group, p 2; Submission 189 Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, p 11.

³⁶⁰ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 3.

³⁶¹ Submission 120, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education, p 4.

- other qualifications for veterinary nurses, not all of which are nationally recognised.³⁶²

- 6.4** Certificate IV qualifications are delivered by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and TAFE institutes.³⁶³
- 6.5** In her evidence, Dr Patricia Clarke, Chair, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education, indicated that certificate qualifications for veterinary nurses are due for review. Dr Clarke noted that there is anecdotal evidence that content is not consistent between providers. The National Industry Advisory Group for Veterinary Nursing stated that it will conduct a survey of providers to get a better understanding of consistency. This will contribute to the review of qualifications to take place in 2024.³⁶⁴
- 6.6** Animal Care Australia also noted concerns about the quality of training of some veterinary nurses. The organisation explained that some providers are unable to ensure veterinary nursing students get the necessary practical experience due to high demand for student places. It was suggested that this can lead to 'an abundance of inexperienced ... yet qualified nurses' who may not be prepared for the job requirements once they are employed.³⁶⁵

Veterinary technicians

- 6.7** Since 2001, three Australian universities have offered a bachelor degree in veterinary technology. Individuals with these degrees are commonly referred to as veterinary technicians.³⁶⁶
- 6.8** The bachelor of veterinary technology is offered by the following universities:
- the University of Queensland³⁶⁷
 - Charles Sturt University (this degree integrates Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing; alternatively those who already have a Certificate IV get credit towards their degree)³⁶⁸
 - the University of Adelaide.³⁶⁹

³⁶² Evidence, Mr Gary Fitzgerald, President, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, 30 August 2023, p 7.

³⁶³ RTOs are regulated by the Australian Skills Quality Authority, which is also responsible for accrediting nationally recognised courses. Australian Government Australian Skills Quality Authority, *What is an RTO?*, <https://www.asqa.gov.au/rto/what-is-an-rto>.

³⁶⁴ Evidence, Dr Patricia Clarke, Member, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia), 30 August 2023, p 8.

³⁶⁵ Submission 160, Animal Care Australia, p 4.

³⁶⁶ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, pp 1-5; Submission 120, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education, p 3.

³⁶⁷ Submission 120, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education, p 4.

³⁶⁸ Correspondence from Dr Esther Callcott and Professor Megan Smith, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University, to Chair, 24 April 2024, p 1.

³⁶⁹ Submission 120, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia), p 4.

Roles for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians

- 6.9** Much of the evidence provided about roles of veterinary nurses and technicians did not distinguish between the two, despite the evidence above indicating that a veterinary technician is likely to be bachelor qualified, whereas a veterinary nurse is more likely to have a Certificate IV.
- 6.10** The Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia described veterinary nurses and technicians as 'integral members of the collective veterinary healthcare team' who work in a range of veterinary practices, including:
- general practice (small and large animals)
 - specialist referral hospitals
 - ambulatory services (such as on farm visits)
 - wildlife facilities
 - teaching facilities.³⁷⁰
- 6.11** The Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia also provided a comprehensive outline of the tasks that appropriately trained veterinary nurses and technicians can undertake, including:
- providing care to the animal and educating pet owners about animal health
 - performing technical procedures to support the veterinarian, including:
 - diagnostic imaging
 - taking and processing blood samples
 - administering medications, including intravenous drugs
 - administering anaesthesia
 - triage
 - wound care and management
 - surgical nursing before, during and after surgery.³⁷¹
- 6.12** Other inquiry participants acknowledged that veterinary nurses and technicians are highly skilled and perform a range of tasks.³⁷²
- 6.13** Charles Sturt University provided evidence specific to veterinary technicians. Dr Esther Callcott and Professor Megan Smith, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University, described the role as similar to that of a registered nurse or nurse practitioner in the human health care system 'performing a role somewhere between that of a nurse and a doctor'.³⁷³ Dr Callcott and Professor Smith observed that there are multiple roles for qualified veterinary technicians, including:
- practice manager in veterinary hospitals and clinics

³⁷⁰ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 2.

³⁷¹ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 2.

³⁷² Correspondence from Dr Callcott and Professor Smith, to Chair, 24 April 2024, p 1; Submission 20, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 183, Name suppressed, p 1.

³⁷³ Correspondence from Dr Callcott and Professor Smith, to Chair, 24 April 2024, p 1.

- regulatory reporting, clinical development and pharmaceutical sales
- animal control officer, quarantine officer and veterinary forensics
- biomedical research, pathology laboratories and wildlife conservation
- work in animal shelters and wildlife rescue.³⁷⁴

6.14 The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) referred to veterinary nurses and technicians as 'integral to modern veterinary practice' and noted that they work under the 'direction, supervision and responsibility' of veterinarians.³⁷⁵ Overall, veterinarians were very supportive and emphasised the role of nurses in their practice. For example:

- Dr Ken Jacobs stated that 'The most effectively managed practices have experienced and active veterinary nurses who improve efficiency of the veterinary workforce', however, he noted that veterinarians remain responsible for outcomes.³⁷⁶
- Dr Sarah Pollard-Williams indicated that in the future nurses could help take on some of the tasks of veterinarians, and relieve their workload: 'they should be able to pick up a lot of the slack in veterinary clinics in terms of admitting animals, preparing animals, maybe taking blood samples, maybe doing the lab work that goes with that ... a veterinary nurse or a veterinary tech could place an IV catheter and safely put an animal onto an IV fluid drip'.³⁷⁷
- A submission author commented that nurses should be upskilled and allowed to perform some veterinary tasks: 'Allow them to train, pass exams and move into the lower skilled veterinary work. Give recognition to the various levels'.³⁷⁸

Challenges for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians

6.15 Stakeholders identified that challenges for veterinary nurses and technicians fell into two broad categories:

- a lack of recognition and utilisation of their skills and abilities by their employers which leads to dissatisfaction in the workplace
- challenging workplace conditions, including workload, low salaries and poor customer behaviour.

6.16 As previously noted, veterinary nurses and technicians are capable of performing an extensive list of tasks. However, inquiry participants were concerned that these skills are not always used during their employment. This was linked to job dissatisfaction and other issues.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁴ Correspondence from Dr Callcott and Professor Smith, to Chair, 24 April 2024, p 3.

³⁷⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 36.

³⁷⁶ Submission 117, Dr Ken Jacobs, p 14.

³⁷⁷ Evidence, Dr Sarah Pollard-Williams, Veterinarian, 4 April 2024, p 7.

³⁷⁸ Submission 9, Name suppressed, p 1.

³⁷⁹ See, Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 4; Evidence, Dr Courtney Baskerville, Chair, The Veterinary Nursing Research Group, 30 August 2023, p 7; Submission 152, The Veterinary Nursing Research Group, p 2.

- 6.17** The committee heard that the underutilisation of the nurses and technicians also increases the job load of veterinarians. The Veterinary Nursing Research Group considered this as 'often overlooked' and a contributor to the veterinary workforce shortage.³⁸⁰
- 6.18** Numerous inquiry participants expressed the view that a lack of registration for veterinary nurses and technicians contributed to the challenges faced by this cohort. It was suggested that this leads to an inability to recognise their skill set and on the job capabilities.
- Charles Sturt University stated that 'The primary obstacle that prevents many veterinary technologists from properly fulfilling their role is that theirs is not a recognised profession in the Australian veterinary sector'.³⁸¹
 - The Veterinary Nursing Research Group observed that the underutilisation of these roles in practice could be linked to a lack of trust from veterinarians, with the lack of trust arising from the lack of registration and regulation.³⁸²
 - Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia) said that '... [the] lack of professional recognition has contributed to underutilisation, reduced job satisfaction and a lack of a structured career pathway'.³⁸³
 - Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia commented that registration and regulation will increase their utilisation, increase remuneration and create career pathways.³⁸⁴
- 6.19** A number of stakeholders indicated that a lack of registration, and therefore regulatory oversight, potentially impacts animal welfare. The Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia stated that suitably qualified and regulated professionals are required for 'safeguarding the public interest, protecting public health and maintaining high animal welfare standards'.³⁸⁵
- 6.20** Likewise, the Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney was of the view that allied veterinary practitioners need to be regulated, as currently there is 'no professional oversight or the need to provide appropriate recourse for their failures, potentially leaving the public and their animals in a perilous situation'.³⁸⁶
- 6.21** Options for regulation are discussed in the next section.
- 6.22** Another challenge for veterinary nurses and technicians was identified by the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia and VetPartners. These stakeholders noted that the duties performed by non-veterinarians differs between states and territories, making it hard for nurses and technicians to use their skills if they move around the country.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁰ Submission 152, The Veterinary Nursing Research Group, p 3.

³⁸¹ Correspondence from Dr Callcott and Professor Smith, to Chair, 24 April 2024, p 2.

³⁸² Submission 152, The Veterinary Nursing Research Group, p 2.

³⁸³ Submission 120, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia), p 9.

³⁸⁴ Evidence, Mr Fitzgerald, 30 August 2023, p 6.

³⁸⁵ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 1.

³⁸⁶ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 10.

³⁸⁷ Evidence, Mr Fitzgerald, 30 August 2023, p 10; Submission 171, VetPartners, p 5.

- 6.23** There was also evidence that indicated the award for veterinary nurses only provides sufficient recompense to those early on their careers and with the skill set required for Certificate IV. Mr Gary Fitzgerald, President, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, expressed concern that the award does not adequately recompense those more highly qualified, those with more experience or those with greater technical skills.³⁸⁸
- 6.24** Submissions from individuals tended to focus on challenges such as remuneration, workload and client behaviour, such as:
- wages and award rates are too low, and do not reflect the skillset³⁸⁹
 - clinics are understaffed and client expectations are too high³⁹⁰
 - nurses have mental health challenges due to stress caused by long hours and low pay³⁹¹
 - nurses leave employment due to abuse from clients and practice owners³⁹²
 - staff shortages require inexperienced staff to step in to assist with high risk tasks such as restraining scared or aggressive animals³⁹³
- 6.25** The Science and Health Faculty at Charles Sturt University also indicated that a lack of formal recognition of the skill set of veterinary technicians makes it difficult for veterinary technology students to find clinical placements that they are required to do to complete their degree.³⁹⁴

Options for regulating veterinary nurses and technicians

- 6.26** As previously noted, there is no mandated qualification requirement for employment as a veterinary nurse in New South Wales, with Western Australia being the only state to regulate this sector of the veterinary workforce.³⁹⁵ Many inquiry participants supported rectifying this situation by developing a regulatory regime for vet nurses and technicians.
- 6.27** The following case study describes the registration scheme for veterinary nurses in Western Australia, facilitated and regulated under the same framework as for veterinarians in that state.

³⁸⁸ Evidence, Mr Fitzgerald, 30 August 2023, p 12; Submission 171, VetPartners, page 5.

³⁸⁹ Submission 57, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 63, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 73, Miss Kelsie White, p 1.

³⁹⁰ Submission 10, Name suppressed, p 1.

³⁹¹ Submission 63, Name suppressed, p 1.

³⁹² Submission 20, Name suppressed, p 1; Submission 82, Name suppressed, p 1.

³⁹³ Submission 20, Name suppressed, p1.

³⁹⁴ Correspondence from Dr Callcott and Professor Smith, to Chair, 24 April 2024, p 1.

³⁹⁵ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 3.

Case study - Registration of veterinary nurses in Western Australia³⁹⁶

Western Australia is the only Australian state or territory to mandate registration of veterinary nurses. The *Veterinary Practice Act 2021* (WA) provides for registration and regulation of both veterinarians and veterinary nurses, with oversight by the Veterinary Practice Board Western Australia.

The legislation sets out the requirements for registration as a veterinary nurse in section 13, including the following requirements:

- the person holds a qualification in veterinary nursing recognised by the Board
- the person has sufficient physical and mental capacity
- the person is sufficiently proficient in the English language.

Title protection is also established in section 63 of the Act, prohibiting those who are not registered with the Board from describing themselves as a veterinary nurse, which includes the following prohibitions:

(1) A person who is not a veterinary nurse must not —

- (a) claim to be a veterinary nurse or to be registered as a veterinary nurse; or
- (b) claim to be entitled to practise as a veterinary nurse; or
- (c) do anything that could reasonably be expected to cause another person to believe that the person is a veterinary nurse, is registered as a veterinary nurse or is entitled to practise as a veterinary nurse.

Misconduct and unprofessional conduct are proscribed under the Act and apply to both veterinarians and veterinary nurses. Complaints against nurses and veterinarians are dealt with similarly.

Section 7 of the *Veterinary Practice Regulations 2022* (WA) outlines acts of veterinary medicine which nurses are authorised to carry out under direct supervision of a veterinarian and those which are authorised to be carried out under direction of a veterinarian.

The Board recognises the current Certificate IV in veterinary nursing delivered by approved RTOs for registration purposes. The Board also accepts qualifications on the list of recognised and approved veterinary nursing qualifications published by the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia. This list includes the qualifications listed elsewhere in this chapter. However, the Nurses Council does not recognise overseas veterinary surgeon qualifications.

In 2023 there were 2,137 registered nurses in Western Australia, (compared to 1,832 registered veterinarians). The Board recorded that 'several persons' were found to be practising as veterinary nurses without approval. No formal proceedings were taken against them 'as it was not in the public interest, and they were remorseful'.

³⁹⁶ This case study is based on information from the following: *Veterinary Practice Act 2021* (WA); *Veterinary Practice Regulation 2022* (WA); Veterinary Practice Board Western Australia, *Registration of veterinary nurses*, https://www.vsbwa.org.au/Public/_VSBWA/Nurses/Approval-of-Veterinary-Nurses.aspx?hkey=9470a69d-b818-4264-ada9-788982de86dc; Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, *Recognised Qualifications*, <https://www.vnca.asn.au/membership/recognised-qualifications/>; Veterinary Practice Board of Western Australia, *Final Annual Report 2022-2023*, https://www.vsbwa.org.au/Public/_VSBWA/Newsletters-and-Annual-Reports-.aspx?hkey=1f75b047-2f28-43a7-91be-a53be082ebf7, pp 2 and 9.

6.28 The committee heard that a regulatory framework would improve the recognition and value of veterinary technicians. Dr Courtnay Baskerville, Chair, Veterinary Nursing Research Group, outlined the support and advantages of mandatory regulation:

... [there is] support from both professional organisations and wider industry ... the associated benefits of this will enable mobilisation of this highly skilled and dedicated profession, increasing trust from associated professional groups and ultimately empowering this profession to contribute their unique and essential knowledge of patient care and client support to better the veterinary team environment.³⁹⁷

6.29 Mr Fitzgerald gave similar evidence about the benefits of a regulatory framework in terms of remuneration:

With regulation and registration, I also imagine that there will come increased remuneration, which has been a chronic issue for attrition rates in veterinary nurses and technicians historically, because they are so low paid that most of them will not stay in the profession for very long or in the industry for very long.³⁹⁸

6.30 Likewise, Charles Sturt University observed that trained veterinary nurses and technicians will 'reduce the workload and allow veterinarians to employ their specialist skills in animal health diagnoses and treatments'.³⁹⁹

6.31 In the evidence presented to the inquiry there was clearly support for 'regulation' of veterinary nurses and technicians. Broadly, the term 'regulation' was used to either describe support for minimum qualifications and the right to use the title of veterinary nurse or technician ('registration and title protection'), or extending accountability for actions when caring for animals, with the potential for censure for not acting in accordance with professional standards. Both concepts are explored in the following sections.

Registration and title protection

6.32 Prior to discussing registration and title protection for veterinary nurses and technicians, it is useful to understand registration and title protection for veterinarians in New South Wales as established by the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, specifically:

- section 21 describes the requirement to hold an approved university qualifications for registration in order to qualify for registration⁴⁰⁰
- section 11 describes it as an offence for an unqualified person to represent themselves as a veterinary practitioner⁴⁰¹
- section 11 also prohibits an unqualified person from describing themselves as a 'veterinary surgeon', 'veterinary practice', 'veterinary', 'vet' or 'animal doctor'.⁴⁰²

³⁹⁷ Evidence, Dr Baskerville, 30 August 2023, p 7.

³⁹⁸ Evidence, Mr Fitzgerald, 30 August 2023, p 10.

³⁹⁹ Submission 200, Charles Sturt University, Faculty of Science and Health, p 5. Also see, Submission 81, Mrs Jane Bindloss, p 1.

⁴⁰⁰ *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, s 21

⁴⁰¹ *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, s 11(1)

⁴⁰² *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, s 11 (3)(a) and (b)

- 6.33** In 2019 the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia initiated the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician (AVNAT) Registration Scheme, a voluntary national registration scheme for nurses and technicians in clinical, management or academic areas.⁴⁰³ There are currently 1,000 nurses and technicians registered via this scheme.⁴⁰⁴ To put this in context, there are almost 11,000 employed vet nurses in Australia.⁴⁰⁵ This scheme uses the following definitions:
- 'Registered Veterinary Nurse' - a person with a nationally recognised veterinary nursing qualification' and who is registered with a recognised governing body
 - 'Registered Veterinary Technician' - a person with a nationally recognised degree in veterinary technology or equivalent major and who is registered with a recognised governing body.⁴⁰⁶
- 6.34** The Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) and the Veterinary Nurses Council are currently working to implement mandatory national registration and regulation of veterinary nurses and technicians.⁴⁰⁷ The AVBC noted its Sustainable Practice Committee investigated the regulation of vet nurses in 2022 and found that there was broad support for 'state-based veterinary legislation defining a veterinary nurse/technician as a person with suitable qualifications who is registered with an independent national body such as the AVBC'.⁴⁰⁸ Moreover, the AVBC noted the World Organisation of Animal Health recommended that Australian veterinary boards register veterinary paraprofessionals.⁴⁰⁹
- 6.35** The Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW similarly supported a national approach to registration of veterinary nurses in Australia and said that recognition of the national body should be a 'priority for any changes to veterinary practice legislation in NSW'.⁴¹⁰
- 6.36** The AVA advocated both registration and title protection for veterinary nurses and technicians, albeit only for nurses and technicians working under the supervision of veterinarians, explaining: 'These professionals would need to operate under the licensure and supervision of a registered veterinarian to ensure monitoring, accountability, and maintenance of required and regulated standards'.⁴¹¹
- 6.37** The committee heard that the NSW Government is working in partnership with the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW and the AVA to determine if registration of nurses will assist in helping with the veterinary workload. Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries, advised that the Western Australian approach to registration is being investigated as a potential model for New South Wales.⁴¹²

⁴⁰³ Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, AVNAT Registration Scheme, <https://www.vnca.asn.au/avnat/>

⁴⁰⁴ Evidence, Mr Fitzgerald, 30 August 2023, p 6.

⁴⁰⁵ Submission 120, Educators for Allied Veterinary Health Profession in Higher Education, p 4.

⁴⁰⁶ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 4.

⁴⁰⁷ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 4.

⁴⁰⁸ Submission 189, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, pp 11-12.

⁴⁰⁹ Submission 189, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, pp 11-12.

⁴¹⁰ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 7.

⁴¹¹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 11.

⁴¹² Evidence, Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries, 30 August 2023, p 56.

- 6.38** Professor Shane Raidal, Professor in Veterinary Pathobiology, Charles Sturt University, suggested that the existing registration framework under the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW could be extended to veterinary technicians.⁴¹³ In his submission, Professor Raidal proposed that the existing legislative framework in the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* could be adapted to allow for limited registration of veterinary technicians with appropriate qualifications under the immediate supervision of a registered veterinarian. This could be similar to the category of limited registration available to overseas trained veterinarians (where their degree is not recognised in Australia).⁴¹⁴

Accountability for professional conduct

- 6.39** Under the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, veterinarians are accountable for their own actions and for those working under them. The definition of unsatisfactory professional conduct includes failure to 'supervise a person adequately in doing an act where supervision by a veterinary practitioner was required by law'.⁴¹⁵
- 6.40** Professional requirements do not apply to veterinary nurses or technicians, and instead the veterinary practitioner is responsible for actions undertaken by their employees. The Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney indicated that this influences the cost of indemnity insurance to vets, which is passed on to clients in the form of treatment fees.⁴¹⁶ The university further commented that it would be appropriate if 'all paraprofessionals [were] registered and subject to performance standards, as well as their own insurance ... obligations'.⁴¹⁷
- 6.41** The Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia was unequivocal that regulation will 'make veterinary nurses and technicians accountable for professional practice and conduct'.⁴¹⁸
- 6.42** The AVA had similar views that nurses should be accountable for their actions, stating: 'Mandatory professional registration for veterinary nurses and technicians would bring rights and responsibilities, as well as increasing professionalism - to the benefit of the veterinary profession and the public it serves'.⁴¹⁹
- 6.43** Dr Julia Crawford, Veterinarian and past President of the Australian Veterinary Association, considered registration to be vital to assist in recognition of their increasing professional standards, but also for animal welfare and consumer protection. Dr Crawford also noted that the absence of professional conduct standards for veterinary nurses means they cannot be reported if they have, for example, substance abuse issues.⁴²⁰

⁴¹³ Evidence, Professor Shane Raidal, Professor in Veterinary Pathobiology, Charles Sturt University, 4 April 2024, p 10.

⁴¹⁴ Submission 110, Professor Shane Raidal, Professor in Veterinary Pathobiology, Charles Sturt University, p 3.

⁴¹⁵ *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*, s 35 (f)

⁴¹⁶ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, pp 10-11.

⁴¹⁷ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 11.

⁴¹⁸ Submission 201, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, p 4.

⁴¹⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 36.

⁴²⁰ Submission 100, Dr Julia Crawford, pp 2-3.

- 6.44 It is not clear whether support for greater accountability for veterinary nurses and technicians for their actions, as outlined above, is support for revision of the current restrictions on acts of veterinary science, which are defined in legislation. This is discussed below.

Restricted acts of veterinary science

- 6.45 As discussed in Chapter 2, restricted acts of veterinary science are specified in the Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013 and can only be undertaken by veterinarians registered in accordance with the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003*. Despite this, the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW (the Board) noted that there are exceptions to these rules, specifically that administration of an anaesthetic agent may be done 'under immediate and direct supervision of a veterinarian', and Certificate IV qualified veterinary nurses may obtain a licence to take radiographs.⁴²¹

- 6.46 Certain stakeholders expressed the view that some acts should be limited to veterinary nurses and technicians, if they were appropriately qualified. For example, the Board suggested that limiting certain currently unrestricted acts to veterinary nurses and technicians could improve animal welfare outcomes and relieve pressure on veterinarians:

The ability of unqualified persons to perform tasks involved in managing the care of animals, whilst not restricted acts of veterinary science, has the potential to significantly impact the health and welfare of animals. Restricting certain tasks to veterinary nurses and technicians has the potential to improve animal welfare outcomes and relieve pressure on veterinarians.⁴²²

- 6.47 Other stakeholders were of the view that some currently restricted acts should be opened to veterinary nurses and technicians, if they were appropriately qualified. For example, a veterinarian indicated that in some clinics nurses already induce anaesthesia, take X-rays and do basic dental procedures under a veterinarian's supervision. The submission author noted that if regulatory change allowed for nurses to carry out these procedures, it would 'increase nurse job satisfaction and reduce veterinarian workload'.⁴²³
- 6.48 Similarly, Dr Geoffrey Dutton, Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Charles Sturt University, stated that veterinary technicians are 'pivotal for the future of the veterinary practice, especially in rural areas. If some of these vet techs can take over some of the tasks, it would go a long way to help'.⁴²⁴ Dr Timothy Mather also supported opening up restricted acts to non-veterinarians, noting it could improve profitability of vet practices:

Legislators need to change the laws to allow paraprofessionals to deliver veterinary services to clients at a lower cost so the massive animal welfare issues facing clients unable to afford veterinary services can be circumvented ...

Overseas veterinary practitioners have been incorporating paraprofessionals within their practices for many years which has augmented profitability and economic survival for those practices.⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 6.

⁴²² Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 6.

⁴²³ Submission 26, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁴²⁴ Evidence, Dr Geoffrey Dutton, Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University, 30 August 2023, p 23.

⁴²⁵ Submission 17, Dr Timothy Mather, p 3.

- 6.49** Other submissions from veterinarians were supportive of skilled nurses taking on veterinary work, which in turn reduces the workload of veterinarians.⁴²⁶
- 6.50** On the other hand, the AVA commented: 'At present, many procedures carried out by these individuals require unnecessary direct supervision by the veterinarian, where direction or a lower level of supervision is more appropriate. This places an increased workload and responsibility and cost on the veterinarian'.⁴²⁷
- 6.51** Melbourne Polytechnic, which delivers the only bachelor's degree of veterinary nursing in Australia, advocated for an 'expanded scope of practice' for bachelor qualified nurses, such as performing routine examinations, administering vaccinations and assisting with minor surgeries under supervision, freeing up capacity for veterinarians to deal with complex patients.⁴²⁸
- 6.52** Melbourne Polytechnic also suggested an expanded role for bachelor qualified nurses, under guidance of a veterinarian, in areas with limited or no access to veterinary service. The tertiary education provider noted that bachelor qualified nurses could provide mobile veterinary services to underserved communities, including preventative care and basic treatments and provide telemedicine consultations.⁴²⁹
- 6.53** The Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education proposed that veterinary technicians and nurses be permitted to conduct procedures which would alleviate the load on veterinarians in rural and regional practices, including blood collection in cattle, disbudding of goats, working with cows on endometritis, pregnancy testing/scanning, and dry cow therapy.⁴³⁰
- 6.54** Dr John Baguley, Registrar, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, indicated that the veterinary profession would need to be consulted on which restricted acts of veterinary science could be opened up to be performed by non-veterinarians. Dr Baguley was of the view that diagnosis and surgery under a general or spinal anaesthetic should only be performed by veterinarians.⁴³¹
- 6.55** Other inquiry participants expressed opposition to removing restrictions on acts of veterinary science, particularly if there is no regulatory oversight or regulation of the non-veterinarian. For example, the committee heard:
- the profession will not flourish if the profitable and 'easy' bits are removed from the job⁴³²
 - deregulation of the use of sedation in horses could potentially lead to poor health outcomes⁴³³

⁴²⁶ Submission 9, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁴²⁷ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 41.

⁴²⁸ Submission 115, Melbourne Polytechnic, p 2.

⁴²⁹ Submission 115, Melbourne Polytechnic, p 2.

⁴³⁰ Submission 120, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia), p 7.

⁴³¹ Evidence, Dr John Baguley, Registrar, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 30 August 2023, p 33.

⁴³² Submission 119, Dr Mary Nicoll, p 1. Also see, Submission 8, Dr Isaac Graham, p 1.

⁴³³ Submission 7, Dr Kurt Enzinger, p 1.

- allowing nurse consults has provided a 'lesser' service to clients⁴³⁴
- Victoria is considering re-introducing restricted acts due to animal welfare concerns.⁴³⁵

Other veterinary paraprofessionals and regulation

- 6.56** In addition to veterinary technicians and nurses, there are other paraprofessionals treating animals, including equine dentists, chiropractors and farriers. The Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney noted that these practitioners are not required to be registered and therefore 'are not subject to an enforceable performance standard overseen by a professional board'.⁴³⁶
- 6.57** As outlined in Chapter 3, stakeholders expressed concerns about the impacts of some of these unregulated professions. Evidence to the inquiry indicated some support for better regulation such as recognised training and professional accountability.⁴³⁷ However, there were also concerns about the practice of non-veterinarian equine dentists, and whether they can adequately carry out dental treatment on a horse without adequate sedation as sedation of horses can only be done by a registered veterinarian.⁴³⁸
- 6.58** In addition, Professor Sharanne Raidal, Professor in Equine Medicine, Charles Sturt University, identified assisted reproductive technologies as not being regulated under legislation, and that there would be public benefit in better regulation of lay people undertaking these practices.⁴³⁹
- 6.59** There was very little other evidence provided to the inquiry which discussed the possible role of other veterinary paraprofessionals, their qualifications or how they might be regulated.

Committee comment

- 6.60** The committee supports regulation and professionalisation of veterinary nurses and technicians. We believe such action will significantly benefit members of the veterinary workforce.

Finding 15

That veterinary nurses and technicians are vital members of the veterinary workforce and will greatly benefit from regulation and professionalisation.

- 6.61** We note that the poor utilisation and pay of veterinary nurses and technicians is linked to the lack of recognition of qualifications. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, qualified veterinarians

⁴³⁴ Submission 47, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁴³⁵ Submission 136, Dr Deborah Neutze, p 5.

⁴³⁶ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 10.

⁴³⁷ Evidence, Dr Erica Kennedy, Veterinarian and Owner, Western Rivers Veterinary Group, 29 August 2023, p 14; Evidence, Dr Isaac Graham, Associate veterinarian, 29 August 2023, pp 14-15.

⁴³⁸ Evidence, Dr Isaac Graham, 29 August 2023, p 15.

⁴³⁹ Evidence, Professor Sharanne Raidal, Professor in Equine Medicine, Charles Sturt University, 4 April 2024, p 10.

are also not well paid. Other challenges faced by veterinary nurses, such as long hours, burn out, mental health issues and client behaviour are the same as those experienced by veterinarians.

- 6.62** The committee acknowledges that work is already being conducted at the national level for recognition and registration standards for veterinary nurses and technicians. The current voluntary registration scheme, Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician (AVNAT) Registration Scheme, developed by the Veterinary Nurse Council of Australia, is a good starting point. This includes the work being done by the Veterinary Nurse Council of Australia with the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.
- 6.63** Regardless, the committee considers that legislated regulation of veterinary nurses and technicians should be introduced in New South Wales. To this end, we recommend that the NSW Government seek to introduce a regulatory framework for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in New South Wales. The framework should encompass:
- minimum qualification requirements, in line with those already in use, specifically the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician Registration Scheme, and the scheme in Western Australia
 - title protection, where only those who meet the minimum qualification requirements can use the protected titles
 - professional standards, including a code of professional conduct
 - oversight by a professional board
 - appropriate rates of pay.

Recommendation 24

That the NSW Government seek to introduce a regulatory framework for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in New South Wales. The framework should encompass:

- minimum qualification requirements, in line with those already in use, specifically the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician Registration Scheme, and the scheme in Western Australia
- title protection, where only those who meet the minimum qualification requirements can use the protected titles
- professional standards, including a code of professional conduct
- oversight by a professional board
- appropriate rates of pay.

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- 6.64** The committee believes that the existing legislation and oversight mechanisms for veterinarians could be adapted and expanded to include veterinary nurses and technicians, rather than a separate legislation and regulatory body. The committee understands that Western Australia regulates both nurses and veterinarians under the same legislation with a single regulatory body.
- 6.65** Importantly, any future legislative framework should be consistent with the scheme in Western Australia. The framework should also build on the existing AVNAT. This would require close cooperation with national bodies, including the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, and the Australian Veterinary Association.

We recommend that any regulatory framework for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in New South Wales:

- be provided under the same legislation as the regulation of veterinarians
- be consistent with the scheme already in place in Western Australia, and aligned as much as possible with the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician voluntary scheme.

Recommendation 25

That any regulatory framework for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in New South Wales:

- be provided under the same legislation as the regulation of veterinarians
- be consistent with the scheme already in place in Western Australia, and aligned as much as possible with the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician voluntary scheme.

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- 6.66** The committee is also of the view that in the long term the regulatory regime should recognise the need for a nationally mobile workforce. Therefore, we recommend that the NSW Government advocate for a nationally consistent registration scheme for veterinary nurses and technicians through the Ministerial Council for Agriculture and other appropriate forums.

Recommendation 26

That the NSW Government advocate for a nationally consistent registration scheme for veterinary nurses and technicians through the Ministerial Council for Agriculture and other appropriate forums.

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- 6.67** The committee notes that the recommendations above are intended to lead to a professional, recognised, and regulated role for qualified veterinary nurses and technicians. It is vital that members of the veterinary team are properly trained and can be held accountable for their actions. The committee agrees that this is important for animal welfare and consumer confidence in veterinary services.

- 6.68** In recommending professionalisation of the veterinary nurses and technicians the committee also intends for to reduce stress and workload for veterinarians. Professionalisation could assist with this in two ways: transferring some of the veterinarians' professional liabilities to registered nurses and technicians; and increasing the scope of tasks undertaken by the nurse or technician, freeing up the veterinarian to focus on the more complex medical needs of animals under their care.

Finding 16

That regulation and better utilisation of veterinary nurses and technicians within the context of clinical practice is likely to assist in reducing the workload on the veterinarian.

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- 6.69** Leading on from the above, the committee is not wholly convinced that increased professional accountability for nurses and technicians will ease the burden on veterinarians if there are no changes to the legal requirements for responsibility for acts of veterinary science.

- 6.70** This leads to the committee to consider whether some restricted acts of veterinary science as defined in the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* could be opened up to registered technicians and nurses. Currently they may only undertake these tasks under immediate supervision of a registered veterinarian, who is legally responsible for their conduct. While there was mixed support for this from various stakeholders, there was sufficient evidence to persuade the committee that the restricted acts should be reviewed. The committee recommends that the NSW Government review the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* to determine whether some restricted acts of veterinary science could be extended to veterinary nurses and technicians who are regulated under the same legislative framework.
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Recommendation 27

The NSW Government review the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* to determine whether some restricted acts of veterinary science could be extended to veterinary nurses and technicians who are regulated under the same legislative framework.

- 6.71** The committee has not seen sufficient evidence to comment on whether there should be registration of other veterinary paraprofessionals.

Chapter 7 Access to veterinary services

This chapter discusses the challenges for consumers, particularly pet owners and animal welfare and rescue groups, when seeking veterinary care. First, the chapter considers barriers for pet owners, such as the cost of veterinary services, proximity to services and access to 24-hour emergency care. Next, it outlines obstacles for rescue groups, namely finding veterinary services that are willing to provide discounted or timely veterinary care; and access to sufficient funds to provide subsidised care to animals in need.

Barriers to accessing veterinary care for companion animals

- 7.1** The committee heard from a range of stakeholders, including pet owners, animal welfare organisations and veterinarians. In all cases the greatest barrier identified related to the affordability of veterinary care. However, the issue of access to a local veterinarian, including out of hours, was regularly raised. Other barriers included lack of access to appropriate transport, and language. There was also evidence that unrealistic and poor education about the realities of pet ownership create obstacles.
- 7.2** Inquiry participants noted that the most significant consequences of barriers to veterinary services relate to animal welfare. A veterinarian explained that pet owners who struggle to afford care for their pets will wait until the last minute to get treatment, which can lead to more suffering and worse outcomes.⁴⁴⁰ A number of submissions from individuals also linked unaffordable pet care to animals being surrendered or euthanised.⁴⁴¹ In fact, PetSure, a pet insurance underwriter, stated: '40 per cent of pet owners say they would consider economic euthanasia of their pet if veterinarian costs were \$3,000'.⁴⁴²
- 7.3** Stakeholders noted that staff shortages can also impact animal welfare. Dr Leanne Bailey explained that her clinic is unable to offer 24 hour services as it has an insufficient number of vets. This affects the type of treatment they can offer the animal, which is not necessarily the best treatment option for optimum animal welfare.⁴⁴³

The cost of veterinary care

- 7.4** The cost of veterinary services is set by the veterinary practice and takes into account the purchase and maintenance of equipment and facilities, such as x-ray machines and surgical facilities, and salary costs for the veterinarian and support staff.⁴⁴⁴
- 7.5** Inquiry participants also indicated that treatments for animals have become increasingly specialised and there are more options for extending an animal's lifespan. Consequently, over its lifetime, the cost of veterinary care for an animal is higher than in previous decades. This

⁴⁴⁰ Submission 78, Name suppressed, p 2.

⁴⁴¹ Submission 36, Mrs Karen Burgess, p 1.

⁴⁴² Submission 199, PetSure, p 5.

⁴⁴³ Submission 89, Dr Leanne Bailey, p 1.

⁴⁴⁴ Submission 103, Name suppressed, p 8; Submission 117, Dr Ken Jacobs, p 7; Submission 127, Name suppressed, p 2.

concern was summarised by the the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA): 'The move to higher standards of veterinary care and hospital standards can only be commended however gold standard comes at a cost and running a veterinary practice these days is a lot more expensive than it was even 20 years ago'.⁴⁴⁵

7.6 During evidence to the committee, animal welfare groups similarly observed:

- community expectations have changed with the types of treatments available, including corneal transplants and injections for diabetes⁴⁴⁶
- veterinarians are highly skilled and are starting to charge in line with their capabilities⁴⁴⁷
- some vets will use high fees to reduce workload, which is their right, but can have consequences for animal welfare.⁴⁴⁸

7.7 Dr Gundula Rhoades, Veterinarian and Owner, Gowrie Veterinary Clinic, listed some of the costs associated operating her clinic in Inverell in northern New South Wales:

- a new x-ray machine and developer cost \$80,000
- 'plating a femur' costs approximately \$2,500 to \$3,500
- high staffing ratios are necessary as often one person will need to hold the animal while the other person treats it.⁴⁴⁹

7.8 Data provided by PetSure demonstrated the range of costs for treatments. PetSure reported, for example, that in 2022 the average cost for treating a dog's skin allergy was \$520, with the highest cost for skin allergy treatment recorded as \$17,460.⁴⁵⁰

7.9 Analysis by the Animal Welfare League NSW showed that the cost of pharmaceuticals and other consumables and equipment has potentially been a greater driver of costs than salary increases, even though they found that salaries have also risen.⁴⁵¹

Affordability of veterinary care

7.10 Many stakeholders noted that affordability was the most significant barrier that prevented pet owners from accessing adequate and/or timely care for their pets. For some owners this includes the cost of basic care such as vaccinations and desexing, whereas other owners indicated that they have been faced with bills of thousands of dollars.

7.11 The committee heard that as a consequence of increased veterinary costs and cost of living pressures, some pet owners are finding it difficult to afford care for their pets. Dr Liz Arnott,

⁴⁴⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 32.

⁴⁴⁶ Evidence, Mr Stephen Albin, CEO, Animal Welfare NSW, 29 August 2023, p 53.

⁴⁴⁷ Evidence, Dr Ann-Margret Withers, Senior Manager, Outreach Programs, RSPCA NSW, p 53

⁴⁴⁸ Evidence, Dr Liz Arnott, Chief Veterinarian, RSPCA NSW, 29 August 2023, p 53.

⁴⁴⁹ Submission 28, Dr Gundula Rhoades, pp 2-3.

⁴⁵⁰ Submission 199, PetSure, p 5.

⁴⁵¹ Submission 94, Animal Welfare League, p 7.

Chief Veterinarian, RSPCA NSW, observed that the RSPCA has experience an increased demand for its services:

As expected from the laws of supply and demand, the cost of veterinary services has increased significantly over recent years, where millions of people around the State are also dealing with extreme cost-of living pressures and, in many cases, experiencing poverty.⁴⁵²

- 7.12** Moreover, the RSPCA quoted the findings of an American study that found that 80 per cent of owners were not accessing veterinary care for their animal as it was unaffordable, and said these findings are 'directly applicable' to Australia.⁴⁵³
- 7.13** Ms Amy Johnson, a pet owner, described the impact of not being able to afford veterinary care:
- I have struggled to pay vet costs for my pets, the after-hours vets charge 3 to 4 times the cost of a regular vet ... This means if your pet is sick you are forced to pay over [ten thousand dollars] to have them treated at an emergency vet, we have had to kill our pets with euthanasia because we can't afford the extremely expensive vet fees ...⁴⁵⁴
- 7.14** Mr Bryan Mcgrath also provided anecdotal evidence of people having to euthanise their pets because of the high cost of treatment.⁴⁵⁵
- 7.15** Speaking as a practice owner, Dr Zachary Lederhose, NSW Division President, Australian Veterinary Association, indicated that he tailors the care he offers according to the resources available to the pet owner. However, Dr Lederhose noted that is there is no 'safety net' to ensure that all pets get adequate care when the funds available to the owner are dictating the level of care.⁴⁵⁶
- 7.16** Certain stakeholders considered this issue to be particularly pressing. A large volume of evidence presented during the inquiry noted the benefits of pet ownership to an individual's health, including physical and psychological wellbeing.⁴⁵⁷ For example, Dr Alan Fridley commented: 'Too often those who benefit most from the companionship of a dog or cat or budgie cannot afford proper veterinary care'.⁴⁵⁸ Moreover, the committee heard that pet ownership has benefits for the wider community, including decreasing health care costs and increasing amenity.⁴⁵⁹
- 7.17** Following on, a central tension in discussions about affordability was whether the individual or the community should be responsible for the care of pets. On one hand, there were inquiry participants who were of the view that pet ownership is a personal choice and responsibility.

⁴⁵² Evidence, Dr Arnott, 29 August 2023, p 44.

⁴⁵³ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 13.

⁴⁵⁴ Submission 71, Ms Amy Johnson, p 1.

⁴⁵⁵ Submission 72, Mr Bryan Mcgrath, p 1.

⁴⁵⁶ Evidence, Dr Zachary Lederhose, NSW Division President, Australian Veterinary Association, 30 August 2023, p 42.

⁴⁵⁷ For example Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 13; Submission 18, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁴⁵⁸ Submission 130, Dr Alan Fridley, p 3.

⁴⁵⁹ Evidence, Ms Kristina Vesik, Chief Executive Officer, Cat Protection Society, 30 August 2023, p 3.

For example, Mr Karl Augustine asserted individuals should not own a pet if they cannot afford vet costs:

If they can't afford the tens of thousands for a healthy animal to be cared for and many thousands more for a companion animal to have veterinary care ... they should not have the pet to begin with.⁴⁶⁰

- 7.18** Alternatively, other stakeholders suggested that animal care and welfare is the responsibility of the entire community. Ms Kristina Vesk, Chief Executive Officer, Cat Protection Society, explained this argument:

... care and welfare is the responsibility of the whole of community, and I don't think we should be just tying that to pet owners or councils ... when animal health and welfare are good, so are human health and welfare.⁴⁶¹

- 7.19** Organisations such as the Cat Protection Society, Sentient, RSPCA and the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation argued that issues regarding access to veterinary care should be viewed through a 'One Health, One Welfare' framework. For example, the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, explained that:

A robust veterinary workforce is not only critical to maintain animal health and welfare but also has major implications for human health and welfare. Veterinarians are a fundamental part of 'One Health, One Welfare' which seeks to optimize the health and welfare of people, animals and their environment and recognises the interconnection between these elements.⁴⁶²

- 7.20** The RSPCA further explained how the 'One Health, One Welfare' framework is relevant to considerations around access to vet care:

The one welfare concept recognises that the health and wellbeing of people is connected to the health of animals and the environment. Barriers to accessing vet care disproportionately impact vulnerable members of our community further risking their physical and mental health and threatening the welfare of their animals.⁴⁶³

- 7.21** The RSPCA concurred, stating that society should provide the necessary support to ensure animals can be cared for properly and that barriers for pet owners have increased as the veterinary workforce shortage drives up the cost of care and reduces the number of vets in some areas.⁴⁶⁴

- 7.22** Mr Robert Campbell, pet owner, supported the introduction of government funding to help pet owners who cannot afford their pet care needs:

Pet owners should not have to choose between paying bills, rent or mortgage payments, putting food on the table and paying for expensive pet medications. Perhaps one of the

⁴⁶⁰ Submission 6, Mr Karl Augustine, p 1.

⁴⁶¹ Evidence, Ms Vesk, 30 August 2023, p 3.

⁴⁶² Submission 167, Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, p 3.

⁴⁶³ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 14.

⁴⁶⁴ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 13.

recommendations from this inquiry will lead to some sort of subsidised veterinary care and/or pet medications.⁴⁶⁵

7.23 The following sections set out the current availability of subsidised vet care and considers options, such as 'Veticare' and pet insurance to address affordability concerns.

Access to subsidised pet care

7.24 Animal welfare groups have provided subsidised pet care to owners, primarily funded by private donations with some government support, for many years. Despite growing demand, this subsidised care is increasingly difficult to provide due to rising costs, the closure of vet practices and practices no longer willing to discount treatment. As discussed in Chapter 2, subsidised care providers also faces regulatory challenges, particularly the use of mobile veterinary clinics.

7.25 The RSPCA told the committee that it provides a number of programs which support pet owners to ensure they can access affordable care for their pets, including:

- programs for First Nations communities that are at least 100 kilometres from veterinary services, to ensure the animals in the community are healthy, and to mitigate risks to human health
- subsidised veterinary care for pets of aged care clients and pets of people suffering homelessness
- 35 per cent discounts off veterinary bills for holders of Centrelink cards using services in RSPCA hospitals.⁴⁶⁶

7.26 The RSPCA also provides assistance to clients accessing services at private veterinary clinics. However, the organisation cannot meet the demand, with over 700 requests for assistance in one year, with only 144 clients assisted at a total cost of approximately \$100,000.⁴⁶⁷

7.27 Animal Welfare League NSW also funds veterinary services for low income households, including vaccinations, desexing, microchipping and emergency surgery. Mr Stephen Albin, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League NSW, recounted that in the previous year, the organisation provided supplementary funding to have 2,500 animals desexed, with the requests for assistance so far in the current year triple that.⁴⁶⁸

7.28 Animal Welfare League NSW services are provided at its veterinary clinic and via its purpose built Animal Care Truck, which generally services rural and regional areas with little or no local veterinary service. The league noted that with the increasing costs in veterinary fees their funding cannot provide the same number of services, and demand for services exceeds its ability to provide them.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁵ Submission 21, Mr Robert Campbell, p 3.

⁴⁶⁶ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, pp 13-14.

⁴⁶⁷ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 14.

⁴⁶⁸ Submission 94, Animal Welfare League NSW; Evidence, Mr Albin, 29 August 2023, p 49.

⁴⁶⁹ Submission 94, Animal Welfare League NSW, pp 2 and 8.

- 7.29** The Cat Protection Society provides support for low income cat owners for veterinary care in partnership with private practices, in particular for desexing and vaccination. In its submission, the organisation described how the closure of a partner clinic in the regions, coupled with other clinics no longer accepting new clients, has led to waiting lists for their referred clients.⁴⁷⁰
- 7.30** As discussed in Chapter 5, teaching hospitals provide subsidised vet care. The Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney said that its teaching hospitals in Sydney and Camden provide subsidised care for lost and stray animals, as well as for pet owners with low incomes.⁴⁷¹
- 7.31** Another issue that was raised related to the uneven distribution of subsidised pet services across Local Government Areas. A submission author who has assisted in animal shelters and rescue noted this concern and added that in their area, which has approximately 20 or more veterinary practices, only three vet practices accepted vouchers for discounted desexing for National Desexing Month.⁴⁷²

Pet insurance

- 7.32** Stakeholders told the committee that pet insurance was an option, but not a solution, to increase the affordability of veterinary care for pets. It was noted that pet insurance can be expensive, does not cover all medical procedures, and market forces are unlikely to make insurance an effective solution over time.
- 7.33** PetSure, a pet insurance underwriter for over 190,000 cats and dogs in New South Wales, noted that between eight and 13 per cent of pets are insured across Australia.⁴⁷³ PetSure provided evidence about the positive impact that pet insurance can have.
- A study found that pet insurance was linked to a lower rate of pre-surgical euthanasia for dogs with the emergency condition gastric dilatation volvulus. The presurgical euthanasia rate for insured dogs was 10 per cent, with the rate being 37 per cent for uninsured dogs.
 - In Sweden dog owners have compulsory 'liability coverage' which is linked to a 90 per cent rate of pet insurance. At least one study linked this to good working conditions and pay for veterinarians in Sweden.⁴⁷⁴
- 7.34** Dr Joanne Coombe, Chief Veterinary Officer, NSW Department of Primary Industries, noted that in countries where uptake is more widespread the competition between insurance providers causes pet insurance to be more affordable.⁴⁷⁵
- 7.35** Certain veterinarians were supportive of pet insurance, noting some of the benefits included:

⁴⁷⁰ Submission 181, Cat Protection Society, pp 1 and 6.

⁴⁷¹ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, p 12.

⁴⁷² Submission 155, Name suppressed, p 4.

⁴⁷³ Evidence, Ms Alexandra Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, PetSure, 29 August 2023, pp 63 and 67.

⁴⁷⁴ Submission 199, PetSure, p 6.

⁴⁷⁵ Evidence, Dr Joanne Coombe, Chief Veterinary Officer, NSW Department of Primary Industries, 30 August 2023, p 62.

- better treatment and investigation, providing a higher level of animal care, helping avoid economic euthanasia and increasing professional satisfaction⁴⁷⁶
- 'increased level of service and care' for small animals⁴⁷⁷
- insured pets being taken to the vets sooner for treatment, saving on costs in the long run through early intervention and prevention.⁴⁷⁸

7.36 The AVA, while agreeing that pet insurance can assist with the cost of pet care, acknowledged that insurance is not affordable for those on low incomes.⁴⁷⁹

7.37 A number of other veterinarians were concerned that the pet insurance industry needed to be better regulated and more affordable if pet insurance was to make a difference to the affordability of care. Examples of these comments included:

- 'clean up the Pet Insurance industry – pet insurance is one of the salvations of our industry'⁴⁸⁰
- 'I believe strongly in pet insurance but I also believe that standards need to be very transparent, consistent and attractive for pet owners'⁴⁸¹
- 'I think pet insurance needs to be better regulated ... So many clients do not have pet insurance because it is expensive and doesn't cover a lot that it probably should'.⁴⁸²

7.38 Other witnesses also raised concerns about pet insurance, such as:

- mandating pet insurance would not necessarily assist in those cases of animal cruelty where the owner does not have sufficient funds to provide adequate care⁴⁸³
- pet insurance is expensive with many exclusions, including behavioural and genetic issues, and becomes more expensive as the animal ages⁴⁸⁴
- Choice, the consumer rights organisation, has shown that some vet insurance companies take advantage of people.⁴⁸⁵

7.39 There was evidence to the inquiry that was supportive of subsidised pet insurance, or even compulsory pet insurance. For example, Dr Ken Jacobs proposed that the NSW Government provide a subsidy for pet insurance for those on benefits.⁴⁸⁶ Other stakeholders, including

⁴⁷⁶ Submission 50, Dr Rodney Starr, p 3.

⁴⁷⁷ Submission 99, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁴⁷⁸ Evidence, Dr Brett Hodgkin, Chief Veterinary Officer, VetPartners, 29 August 2023, p 68.

⁴⁷⁹ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 9.

⁴⁸⁰ Submission 51, Dr Bruce Krumm, p 2.

⁴⁸¹ Submission 93, Dr Sandra Hodgins, p 2.

⁴⁸² Submission 96, Name suppressed, p 1.

⁴⁸³ Evidence, Mr Brett Whitworth, Deputy Secretary, Office of Local Government, NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 30 August 2023, p 61.

⁴⁸⁴ Evidence, Dr Rosemary Elliott, Sentient, The Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics, 29 August 2023, pp 3 and 4.

⁴⁸⁵ Submission 72, Mr Brian Mcgrath, p 1.

⁴⁸⁶ Submission 117, Dr Ken Jacobs, p19.

Sophie's Legacy and Dr Alan Fridley, proposed that compulsory pet insurance be linked to pet registration.⁴⁸⁷

- 7.40** Mr Brett Whitworth, Deputy Secretary, Office of Local Government, NSW Department of Planning and Environment, was cautious about proposals that would make pet insurance mandatory and presumably linked to pet registration, as this would increase costs to the owner.⁴⁸⁸
- 7.41** Separately, there was support for education for pet owners on the benefits of pet insurance. Our Vet-Petstock Vet, a national network of 58 general practices, proposed a government driven campaign to raise awareness and promote the benefits of insurance.⁴⁸⁹

Veticare

- 7.42** The committee received a number of proposals to support subsidised vet care. Some evidence to the inquiry concerned a proposed scheme called 'Veticare'. Opinions varied as to what such a scheme would look like. However, there was support from certain stakeholders for a Medicare-type scheme to treat pets. For example, Sentient, the Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics, supported a scheme that provides bulk billing in public vet clinics and private practices:

[the scheme] would allow access to bulk billed veterinary care in public veterinary clinics ... where wildlife carers could also bring sick or injured native species for treatment. ...also be incorporated into private veterinary clinics, where those who are able to would pay a gap fee to cover the cost of treatment, whereas pension and concession card holders would be bulk billed.⁴⁹⁰

- 7.43** The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation supported a government implemented Veticare system that provided 'accessible' veterinary care to low income families.⁴⁹¹ Mrs Ellie Robertson was also supportive of a scheme along the lines of the Medicare system, including bulk billing.⁴⁹²
- 7.44** RSPCA NSW was highly supportive of government-subsidised vet care, highlighting that this occurs in many other jurisdictions:

If you look all around the world, in the United States, in the UK, in Canada, even in Victoria, there are lots of models there for access to vet care that is government supported. In Victoria the Government put out a lot of grants to try to get low-cost clinics to be developed. If there was more funding then we would be able to support that need, and that would have the flow-on effects of improving animal welfare. It decreases stress on vets in the community because we know that one of the greatest stresses is the ethical distress because they can't treat animals, and they are either euthanising them because the owner can't afford something. Actually having that will have lots of flow-on benefits for the vets, for the animals and for the community.⁴⁹³

⁴⁸⁷ Submission 150, Sophie's Legacy, p 4; Submission 130, Dr Alan Fridley, p 3.

⁴⁸⁸ Evidence, Mr Whitworth, 30 August 2023, p 61.

⁴⁸⁹ Submission 87, OurVet-Petstock Vet, p 3.

⁴⁹⁰ Answers to question on notice, Sentient, Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics, 28 September, p 1.

⁴⁹¹ Submission 167, Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, p 9.

⁴⁹² Evidence, Mrs Ellie Robertson, 29 August 2023, p 32.

⁴⁹³ Evidence, Dr Withers, 29 August 2023, p 51.

- 7.45** Additionally, at least one major network of private veterinary services, OurVet-Petstock Vet, was supportive of government funded hospitals.⁴⁹⁴
- 7.46** On the other hand, the AVA was strongly opposed to the introduction of government funded public veterinary hospitals, as it considered these clinics would be in competition with privately owned veterinary infrastructure which is already struggling to meet costs. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the AVA is supportive of government funding to existing veterinary practices to continue the public good they already offer, such as care for wildlife and strays, and subsidies for providing services for those on low incomes.⁴⁹⁵
- 7.47** Animal Care Australia similarly suggested that Veticare could lead to a system that pays less to veterinarians than in private practice.⁴⁹⁶ The organisation also expressed concern that there are no details or model to discuss, and no funding for a Veticare scheme.⁴⁹⁷
- 7.48** Other stakeholders also proposed subsidised schemes. PetSure proposed a collaboration with government and industry for a program called 'Safety Net' which would provide veterinary care either by telehealth or subsidised care in a clinic.⁴⁹⁸
- 7.49** The Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney suggested that funding from commercial organisations (such as pharmaceutical and insurance companies), veterinary associations and local government authorities could be used to provide subsidised veterinary care, as well as tax concessions for veterinarians who provide care at a reduced rate.⁴⁹⁹

Consumer expectations and perceptions of veterinary services

- 7.50** The committee heard that consumer understanding and expectations of veterinary services can be an obstacle to accessing care. Pet owners may have limited knowledge of what a veterinarian can achieve, or the high cost of some medical interventions.
- 7.51** A number of veterinarians blamed media and human health provision as drivers behind owners' expectations.⁵⁰⁰ For example, Dr Georgia Ladmore, Veterinarian, commented:

... our TV vets are perhaps [not] doing the profession a great service in explaining that we can do all of these amazing medical feats without having any real explanation of what costs may be incurred for a family if they need to have their dog on a ventilator for three days after tick paralysis or if they have broken three legs and they need major surgery.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁴ Submission 87, OurVet-Petstock Vet, p 3.

⁴⁹⁵ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 61.

⁴⁹⁶ Submission 160, Animal Care Australia, p 8.

⁴⁹⁷ Evidence, Mr Michael Donnelly, President, Animal Care Australia, 29 August 2023, p 30.

⁴⁹⁸ Evidence, Ms Alexandra Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, PetSure, 29 August 2023, p 65.

⁴⁹⁹ Submission 161, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, p 14.

⁵⁰⁰ Evidence, Dr Rosemary Elliott, Sentient, the Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics, 29 August 2023, p 3; Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 32.

⁵⁰¹ Evidence, Dr Georgia Ladmore, Veterinarian, 29 August 2023, p 8.

- 7.52** Dr Deborah Neutze explained that pet owners expect that tests and treatments that are available to humans will also be available for their pet. 'Owners find it difficult to understand why they are expensive, as their experience in human health is that the equivalent services are cheaper or free as they are paid for by Medicare'.⁵⁰² This was echoed in other evidence with various stakeholders noting that subsidised human health care has given pet owners unrealistic expectations as to the cost of similar interventions for their pets.⁵⁰³
- 7.53** In addition, veterinarians report that some pet owners expect discounted care because veterinarians are 'doing it for love'.⁵⁰⁴
- 7.54** The Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW presented evidence that the inability to afford care may increase the likelihood of a complaint being lodged against a veterinarian with the regulator. The Board noted that 80 per cent of complaints over the last five years came from people living in postcode areas where the median income was less than \$40,000 per annum.⁵⁰⁵ Additionally, the Board stated that approximately three quarters of complaints are dismissed.⁵⁰⁶
- 7.55** Ms Kristina Vesk, Chief Executive Officer, Cat Protection Society, indicated that sometimes owners were nervous about visiting a veterinary clinic, particularly if they do not know what the consultation will cost them. Ms Vesk observed that education and support will help people seek veterinary care for their pets.⁵⁰⁷

Access to veterinary services

- 7.56** There were concerns raised during the inquiry about access to veterinary services. As discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, a number of vet practices, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities have closed or offer restricted hours. Stakeholders also discussed how access to reliable transport is a barrier to accessing vet care.
- 7.57** Inquiry participants noted that the continued reduction in the number of clinics and clinic opening hours has a greater impact outside of the major cities.⁵⁰⁸ Ms Mary Anderson stated that her only vet is 40 kilometres away and only works standard business hours. Ms Anderson explained: 'This means that if my dog gets bitten [by a snake] there is a high chance that I will not make it to the vet in time to even start treatment. And if this was to happen after 6 pm, then all I can do is watch my dog die'.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰² Submission 136, Dr Deborah Neutze, p 3.

⁵⁰³ Evidence, Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, 29 August 2023, p 42; Ms Thomas, 29 August 2023, p 64.

⁵⁰⁴ Submission 89, Dr Leanne Bailey, p 1, Submission 100, Dr Julia Crawford, p 4; Submission 134, Name suppressed, p 1, Submission 138, Dr Michael Yazbeck, p 1.

⁵⁰⁵ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 11; Answers to questions on notice, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 28 September 2023, p 6.

⁵⁰⁶ Submission 122, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, p 11; Answers to questions on notice, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, 28 September 2023, p 6.

⁵⁰⁷ Evidence, Ms Vesk, 30 August 2023, pp 4 and 5.

⁵⁰⁸ Submission 151, Sentient, The Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics, pp 7-8 and 10.

⁵⁰⁹ Submission 22, Miss Mary Anderson, p 1.

7.58 Other stakeholders discussed challenges around access to public transport. The RSPCA reported that in the last financial year, 15 per cent of clients using the Access to Vet Care Program, also requested assistance for transport costs.⁵¹⁰ PetSure advocated for pets being allowed on public transport to overcome this concern,⁵¹¹ explaining that 'if you don't have access to a car or don't have access to someone to drive you to the vet, it's very difficult for people to get to their vet'.⁵¹² PetSure concluded that 'If pet access on public transport were possible, even partially, then pet parents (including those with service dogs) would have greater access to veterinary services, as well as food and essential supplies'.⁵¹³

7.59 Sentient agreed and gave evidence that:

We believe animals should definitely be allowed to travel on public transport across NSW, which has long been allowed in the UK, providing there are clear guidelines about safety for those animals and the public. This would assist owners without private transport getting to veterinary appointments and would also allow owners to go on holidays with their pets, take them to recreational areas and generally have the same community access as those who can afford private transport. Veterinary clinics are so overstretched that home visits are becoming less common.⁵¹⁴

7.60 As discussed in Chapter 2, certain inquiry participants suggested telehealth systems could increase the affordability and accessibility of veterinary care, particularly in regional areas. The Animal Welfare League and RSPCA were both supportive of the use of telehealth to make veterinary services more affordable and accessible, while noting that current regulatory arrangements limit its use.⁵¹⁵

7.61 Animal Care Australia suggested a government funded telehealth model. Ms Karri Nadazdy, Animal Care Australia, explained this option: 'you could ring a central number that's government operated. They can then triage you. They can sift out the people who are worried about nothing'.⁵¹⁶

Pet owners for whom English is an additional language

7.62 The committee received evidence about challenges faced by pet owners for whom English is an additional language.

7.63 The Cat Protection Society identified this as an issue for pet owners seeking care. To address this concern, the organisation provides resources on its website in a number of community languages as well a list of clinics where other languages are spoken.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁰ Answers to supplementary questions, RSPCA NSW, 26 September, p 1.

⁵¹¹ Answer to questions on notice, PetSure, 26 September, p 3.

⁵¹² Evidence, Ms Thomas, 29 August 2023, p 66.

⁵¹³ Submission 199, PetSure, p 8.

⁵¹⁴ Answers to supplementary questions, Sentient, 28 September 2023, p 2.

⁵¹⁵ Evidence, Mr Albin, 29 August 2023, p 49; Evidence, Dr Arnott, 29 August 2023, p 49.

⁵¹⁶ Evidence, Ms Karri Nadazdy, Horse and Livestock Representative, Animal Care Australia, 29 August 2023, p 30.

⁵¹⁷ Submission 181, Cat Protection Society, p 6.

7.64 The AVA proposed that the NSW Government provide access for veterinarians to the national Translating and Interpreting Service.⁵¹⁸ This suggestion was supported by a number of inquiry participants, including Dr Debbie Neutze, Mrs Ellie Robertson, PetSure, and the Cat Protection Society.⁵¹⁹

Animal rescue organisations

7.65 In addition to providing subsidised and accessible care to pet owners on low incomes, animal rescue organisations have a major role in rescuing, treating and rehoming abandoned or neglected animals. They rely on in-house veterinary services or services contracted to private vets, generally at a discounted rate.⁵²⁰

7.66 The Animal Welfare League NSW noted that the veterinary workforce shortage has an impact on its ability to provide support to pet owners, in particular:

- it is becoming more difficult to find veterinary practices that are willing to provide discounted services for their rescue animals
- a decrease in the number of private clinics willing to accept injured strays has increased the demands on the Animal Ambulance operated by the Animal Welfare League, to the extent that it now has to limit the areas it operates in order to meet the workload.⁵²¹

7.67 Veterinary shortages also impact animal welfare where pounds are struggling to provide veterinary care to impounded animals. Mr Mark Slater, Director, Animal Services Australasia, described the scenario where a lack of veterinary care, including pain relief, for an impounded dog with poor behaviour can reduce its chances of being rehomed and potentially lead to the need to euthanise it.⁵²²

7.68 Mr Mudher Al-Rahmani, Practice Manager, Vets for Pets, also indicated that fewer private clinics are willing to enter into contracts with councils to offer pound services as it is not cost effective and there are not enough vets available to do the work. He said that councils may have to pay between \$150 and \$250 to have an animal desexed.⁵²³

7.69 The RSPCA, while currently managing its own workload for animals in its care, told the committee that it has been approached by councils to assist with desexing and vaccinating animals for adoption. These councils were unable to find private clinics willing to take on the work. Where possible the RSPCA has stepped in to assist, including providing desexing services

⁵¹⁸ Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 54.

⁵¹⁹ Answers to questions on notice, Dr Debbie Neutze, 7 September 2023, p 2; Answers to questions on notice, Mrs Ellie Robertson, 23 September 2023, p 2; Answers to questions on notice, PetSure, 26 September 2023, p 3; Answers to questions on notice, Cat Protection Society, 29 September 2023, p 1.

⁵²⁰ Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 1; Evidence, Ms Vesk, 30 August 2023, p 2.

⁵²¹ Submission 94, Animal Welfare League NSW, p 4.

⁵²² Evidence, Mr Mark Slater, Director, Animal Services Australasia, 30 August 2023, p 26.

⁵²³ Evidence, Mr Mudher Al-Rahmani, Practice Manager, Vets for Pets, 29 August, p 7.

on weekends. This situation was of concern to the RSPCA, as animals are kept in shelters and pounds longer while waiting for desexing and vaccination prior to adoption.⁵²⁴

- 7.70** The RSPCA outlined an approach that could help with increasing access to desexing cats in areas where there is little or no local capacity, where vets willing to do some of this work as volunteers are brought in to carry out work in vacant clinics. In one example, they utilised a closed veterinary clinic in Albury to provide a desexing clinic.⁵²⁵
- 7.71** Sentient has expressed concerns about the impacts of the veterinarian workforce shortage on animals being kept in shelters prior to rehoming. Sentient explained that the majority of veterinarians working in shelters are recent graduates who have not necessarily yet developed the skills required. This has led to instances, for example, of incomplete desexing before adoption, requiring another surgery post adoption.⁵²⁶
- 7.72** Sentient has proposed that there needs to be more state government funding for animal shelters, to improve pay rates and working conditions, in order to attract and retain experienced veterinarians, and provide mentoring to new graduates.⁵²⁷
- 7.73** The committee also heard evidence about the significant costs incurred by rescue and rehoming organisations in paying for veterinary fees for animals in their care. For example, Mrs Ellie Robertson gave evidence that 'small and large rescue groups struggle to access and pay for veterinary care, especially right now with the increasing number of homeless animals, especially cats, and kittens'.⁵²⁸

Committee comment

- 7.74** The committee was not surprised to learn that the shortage of veterinarians and the cost of services were key barriers to accessing veterinary care by consumers. Indeed, it was clear that affordability concerns impact on a pet owner's willingness to access care. Unfortunately, the lack of timely veterinary care can impact animal welfare. We also note other obstacles to care include access to transport and language barriers.

Finding 17

That difficulties accessing veterinary care for pets and large animals, whether due to restricted service capacity or affordability, can impact on animal welfare.

- 7.75** Interestingly, evidence pointed to a barrier due to consumer attitudes or perceptions of veterinary services. In the case of pet owners, it seemed to the committee that consumers' high expectations and a lack of understanding of the cost drivers of veterinary care can negatively affect the relationship between the pet owner and the veterinarian. In turn, this can lead to poor

⁵²⁴ Evidence, Dr Arnott, 29 August 2023, p 50.

⁵²⁵ Evidence, Dr Arnott, 29 August 2023, p 50.

⁵²⁶ Answers to supplementary questions on notice, Sentient, 28 September 2023, p 2.

⁵²⁷ Answers to supplementary questions on notice, Sentient, 28 September 2023, p 3.

⁵²⁸ Submission 48, Mrs Ellie Robertson, p 2.

behaviour by customers and have a direct effect on the wellbeing and retention of veterinarians and other clinic staff.

7.76 Consequently, we believe that pet owners need to be better educated about the costs and the drivers of costs of veterinary services. The committee therefore recommends that the NSW Government provide support to the Australian Veterinary Association to develop educational materials for pet owners containing information about:

- how veterinary clinics operate
- how pet owners should budget for unexpected costs
- how to create a positive relationship with the veterinary team
- the potential benefits of pet insurance.

7.77 This information should be available in a range of community languages.

Recommendation 28

That the NSW Government provide support for the Australian Veterinary Association to develop educational materials for pet owners containing information about:

- how veterinary clinics operate
- how pet owners should budget for unexpected costs
- how to create a positive relationship with the veterinary team
- the potential benefits of pet insurance.

This information should be available in a range of community languages.

7.78 We further recommend that the NSW Government consider providing information to pet owners when they register their pet. The committee understands the NSW Pet Registry is still in the process of being upgraded. The committee believes the upgraded pet registry could be used as a way of disseminating this educational material to new pet owners. As all cats and dogs in New South Wales are required to be registered, this is a primary point of contact and education for owners. The committee recommends that the NSW Government consider using the NSW Pet Registry to provide educational material to pet owners.

Recommendation 29

That the NSW Government consider using the NSW Pet Registry to provide educational material to pet owners.

7.79 The committee also notes that the AVA has proposed that the NSW Government support extending access to the national Translating and Interpreting Service, and that this proposal was supported by a number of stakeholders. The committee notes that this service is free to medical practitioners providing Medicare rebateable services. The committee recommends the NSW Government advocate to the Australian Government for veterinarians to access the Translating and Interpreting Service for clients who hold Centrelink cards.

Recommendation 30

That the NSW Government advocate to the Australian Government for veterinarians to access the Translating and Interpreting Service for clients who hold Centrelink cards.

- 7.80** The committee recognises the extensive work of animal welfare and rescue organisations in providing and subsidising pet care for owners in need. It accepts that these organisations have found that demand for their subsidised services has outstripped their ability to provide them.
- 7.81** The committee received evidence about private pet insurance from a variety of stakeholders. While it was clear that pet insurance can make pet care more affordable, the evidence also indicated that it was not affordable for all, and has many exclusions, especially as pets get older. This means that the current pet insurance offerings are not a solution for all pet owners. If more insurance providers enter the market and more pet owners take it up it may make pet insurance more affordable, but the timeframe for such an outcome is unknown.
- 7.82** Some witnesses suggested Veticare, a publicly funded insurance scheme, somewhat similar to Medicare, could help with access to affordable veterinary care. This solution is predicated upon a 'schedule' of fees for veterinary services. At present there is no agreed schedule of fees for veterinary services. It is likely that such a scheme would be costly to design, administer and implement if it was to be applied to all public vet access. However, the committee recognises that subsidised veterinary care for lower income earners, pensioners and animal rescue groups was supported broadly by stakeholders, and could be delivered through private veterinary practice. The committee recommends that the NSW Government investigate strategies to best ensure veterinary care for pet owners particularly low income earners can be made more affordable.

Recommendation 31

That the NSW Government investigate strategies to best ensure veterinary care for pet owners particularly low income earners can be made more affordable.

- 7.83** The committee also recommends that the NSW Government investigate providing subsidised vet care to low-income earners, pensioner and animal rescue groups.

Recommendation 32

That the NSW Government investigate providing subsidised vet care to low-income earners, pensioner and animal rescue groups.

- 7.84** Another proposal put to the committee for affordable veterinary care was the establishment of a public hospital system. Once again, the committee notes that it would require significant funds to effectively design, administer and deliver public veterinary services. The committee also notes

there was limited support from the veterinary profession for a public system of veterinary clinics as they are considered to be in direct competition.

- 7.85** The closest approximation to public veterinary hospitals in New South Wales are the clinics run by animal rescue organisations and veterinary schools at universities. Therefore, the committee proposes that the NSW Government provide funding to animal rescue organisations and the university sector to increase subsidised treatments at their veterinary hospitals and provide increased training opportunities for veterinary science and other students.
-

Recommendation 33

That the NSW Government provide funding to animal rescue organisations and the university sector to increase subsidised treatments at their veterinary hospitals and provide increased training opportunities for veterinary science students and others.

- 7.86** Some stakeholders also recommended a dedicated telehealth service be provided to enhance access to veterinary services. The committee notes evidence that private, fee-based, telehealth services are already available.
- 7.87** The committee notes evidence received that lack of animal-friendly public transport was a barrier to accessing veterinary care for some people. The committee therefore recommends that NSW Government consider options for trialling companion-animal friendly public transport.
-

Recommendation 34

That the NSW Government consider options for trialling companion-animal friendly public transport.

Appendix 1 Submissions

No.	Author	Attachments
1	Dr Campbell Costello	
2	Dr Steven Roberts	
3	Name suppressed	
4	Dr Anna Dengate	1
5	Dr James Casey D.V.M., M.S.	
6	Mr Karl Augustine	
7	Dr Kurt Enzinger	
8	Dr Isaac Graham	
9	Name suppressed	
10	Name suppressed	
11	Vets for Pets	
12	Dr James Rawson	
13	Name suppressed	
14	Name suppressed	
15	Name suppressed	
16	Confidential	
17	Dr Timothy Mather	
17a	Dr Timothy Mather	
18	Name suppressed	
19	Mrs Rachel Sussman	
20	Name suppressed	
21	Mr Robert Campbell	
22	Miss Mary Anderson	
23	Name suppressed	
24	Mrs Taryn Tiko	
25	Name suppressed	
26	Name suppressed	
27	Name suppressed	
28	Dr Gundula Rhoades	
29	Name suppressed	
30	Dr Christine Smith	
31	Hunter Equine Centre	

No.	Author	Attachments
32	Goulburn Valley Equine Hospital	
33	Hon Steve Starr	
34	Ms Supriya Roy	
35	Name suppressed	
36	Mrs Karen Burgess	
37	Name suppressed	
38	Confidential	
39	Name suppressed	
40	Name suppressed	
41	Name suppressed	
42	Confidential	
43	Dr Greg Nash	
44	Name suppressed	
45	Confidential	
46	Confidential	
47	Name suppressed	
48	Mrs Ellie Robertson	
49	Name suppressed	
50	Dr Rodney Starr	
51	Dr Bruce Krumm	
52	Dr Tom Lonsdale	3
53	Dr Mazen Al-Obiadi	
54	Name suppressed	
55	Confidential	
56	Name suppressed	
57	Name suppressed	
58	Name suppressed	
59	Confidential	
60	Dr Mark Kallman	
61	Dr Jocelyn Birch Baker	
62	Dr Pavel Kagan	
63	Name suppressed	
64	Dr Tim Reed	
65	Dr Sarah Pollard-Williams	
66	Name suppressed	

No.	Author	Attachments
67	Dr Helen McLean	
68	Name suppressed	
69	Name suppressed	
70	Name suppressed	
71	Ms Amy Johnson	
72	Mr Bryan Mcgrath	
73	Miss Kelsie White	
74	Name suppressed	
74a	Name suppressed	
74b	Name suppressed	
75	Name suppressed	
76	Dr Natalie Courtman	
77	Professor Richard Whittington	1
78	Name suppressed	
79	Ms Louise Johnson	
80	Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology	
81	Mrs Jane Bindloss	
82	Name suppressed	
83	Kookaburra Veterinary Employment	3
84	Name suppressed	
85	Dr John Wiltjer	
86	Name suppressed	
87	OurVet-Petstock Vet	
88	Dr Anthony James	
89	Dr Leanne Bailey	
90	Dr Anna Manning	
91	Ms Deborah Martin	
92	Vets Beyond Borders	
93	Dr Sandra Hodgins	
94	Animal Welfare League NSW	
95	Name suppressed	
96	Name suppressed	
97	Name suppressed	
98	Name suppressed	
99	Name suppressed	

No.	Author	Attachments
100	Dr Julia Crawford	
101	Possumwood Wildlife Recovery & Research Inc Hospital	
102	Dr John Lobban	
103	Name suppressed	
104	Mr Charles Bunce	1
105	Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand	1
106	Dr Kelvin Clarke	
107	Name suppressed	
108	Dr Rodney Reece	1
109	Name suppressed	
110	Professor Shane Raidal	
111	Evan Kosack	
112	Dr Andrew Havadjia	
113	Miss Anna Rek	
114	Animal Services Australasia	
115	Melbourne Polytechnic	
116	Name suppressed	
117	Dr Ken Jacobs	
118	Ms Chantal Whitten	
119	Dr Mary Nicoll	
120	Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia)	
121	The University of Adelaide - School of Animal and Veterinary Science	
122	Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW	
123	Name suppressed	
124	Name suppressed	
125	Name suppressed	
126	Name suppressed	
127	Name suppressed	
128	Dr Andrew Jacotine	
129	Professor Kate Le Bars	
130	Dr Alan Fridley	
131	Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital	
132	VetChat	
133	Name suppressed	

No.	Author	Attachments
134	Name suppressed	
135	Name suppressed	
136	Dr Deborah Neutze	
137	Confidential	
138	Dr Michael Yazbeck	
139	Catmint Cottage Sydney Rescue Inc.	
140	Southern Cross University	
141	NSW Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel	1
142	Dr Michelle Maidment	
143	Dr Gillian Burns	
144	Australian Veterinary Association	
145	Dr Jasmin Klocker	1
145a	Confidential	
146	Name suppressed	
147	Name suppressed	
148	Dr Justin Clancy	
149	NSW Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIRES)	
149a	Confidential	
150	Sophie's Legacy	
151	Sentient, The Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics	
152	The Veterinary Nursing Research Group	
153	ACT Veterinary Practitioners Board	
154	Name suppressed	
155	Name suppressed	
156	Mrs Caroline Winter	
157	Confidential	
158	Dr Lynn Simpson	
159	Dr James Thompson	
159a	Dr James Thompson	
160	Animal Care Australia	
160a	Animal Care Australia	
161	Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney	
162	Dr Zachary Lederhose	
163	Name suppressed	

No.	Author	Attachments
164	Dr Daniel Lawson	
165	Dr Ryan Lame	
166	Name suppressed	
167	Australian Pet Welfare Foundation	
168	Name suppressed	
169	Wildlife Health Australia	
170	Animal Medicines Australia	
171	VetPartners	
172	Ms Elayne Storc	
173	Name suppressed	
174	Confidential	
175	Elizabeth Jones	
176	Local Government NSW	
177	Name suppressed	
178	Name suppressed	
179	Dr Georgia Ladmore	
180	Name suppressed	
181	Cat Protection Society of NSW	
182	Name suppressed	
183	Name suppressed	
184	Dr Erica Kennedy	
185	Confidential	
186	Name suppressed	
187	Name suppressed	
188	Name suppressed	
189	Australasian Veterinary Boards Council	
190	Name suppressed	
191	Name suppressed	
192	Confidential	
193	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry	
194	Jeffrey Titmarsh	
195	Dr Nigel Brown	
196	Name suppressed	1
197	RSPCA NSW	
198	Name suppressed	

No.	Author	Attachments
199	PetSure	
200	Charles Sturt University, Faculty of Science and Health	
201	Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia	1
202	Dr Fiona Hyde Page	
203	Olga von Gaffron	
204	Dr Sharanne Raidal	
205	James Rodger	
206	Name suppressed	
207	Jon Holcombe	
208	Andrew Graham-Higgs	
209	NSW Farmers Association	
210	Mrs Maryrose Zammit	1
211	Mr Wal Broun	
212	Liberty Hall	1
213	Confidential	

Appendix 2 Witnesses

Date	Name	Position and Organisation
Tuesday 29 August 2023 Macquarie Room Parliament House, Sydney	Dr Debbie Neutze	Veterinary Industry Consultant
	Dr Sandra Hodgins	Senior Veterinarian, Hospital Superintendent and Director, Summer Hill Village Vet
	Mr Mudher Al-Rahmani	Practice Manager, Vets for Pets
	Dr Rosemary Elliott	Sentient, The Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics
	Dr Georgia Ladmore <i>(via videoconference)</i>	Veterinarian
	Dr Isaac Graham <i>(via videoconference)</i>	Individual, Associate veterinarian
	Dr Erica Kennedy	Owner and Veterinarian, Western Rivers Veterinary Group
	Mrs Caroline Winter	Journalist, Creator, Podcast series, Sick As A Dog
	Mr Garry Putland	Founder, Sophie's Legacy
	Dr Jocelyn Birch Baker <i>(via videoconference)</i>	Consultant, Smooth Operating Vets and practice owner
	Mr Michael Donnelly	President, Animal Care Australia
	Ms Karri Nadazdy	Horse and Livestock Representative, Animal Care Australia
	Mrs Ellie Robertson	Individual
	Dr Stephen Van Mil	Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital
Mr Matt French	Head of Wildlife Welfare, Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIRES)	
Mr Stephen Albin	Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League NSW	

Date	Name	Position and Organisation
	Dr Liz Arnott	Chief Veterinarian, RSPCA NSW
	Dr Ann-Margret Withers	Senior Manager, Outreach Programs, RSPCA NSW
	Ms Kathy Rankin	A/Head of Policy and Advocacy, NSW Farmers Association
	Dr Robyn Alders AO	Member, NSW Farmers Association
	Mr Rob Cooper	Chair, NSW Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel
	Professor Ian Lean	Member, NSW Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel
	Dr Brett Hodgkin	Chief Veterinary Officer, VetPartners
	Ms Alexandra Thomas	Chief Executive Officer, PetSure
	Dr Claire Jenkins	Veterinarian, Founder and CEO, VetChat
Wednesday 30 August 2023 Macquarie Room Parliament House, Sydney	Ms Kristina Vesk	Chief Executive Officer, Cat Protection Society
	Mr Gary Fitzgerald	President, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia
	Dr Patricia Clarke	Member, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia)
	Dr Courtney Baskerville	Chair, The Veterinary Nursing Research Group
	Professor Jacqueline Norris	Member, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand; Dean and Head of School, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, The University of Sydney

Date	Name	Position and Organisation
	Mr Tim Payne	Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President, The University of Sydney
	Dr Geoffrey Dutton <i>(via videoconference)</i>	Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University
	Professor Jon Hill	Executive Dean, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Southern Cross University
	Mr Mark Slater	Director, Animal Services Australasia
	Dr Steven Ferguson	President, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW
	Dr John Baguley	Registrar, Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW
	Dr Julie Strous	Executive Director, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council
	Dr Mark Simpson	Immediate Past Chair, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council
	Dr Zachary Lederhose	NSW Division President, Australian Veterinary Association
	Dr Cristy Secombe	Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs, Australian Veterinary Association
	Dr Robyn Whitaker <i>(via videoconference)</i>	Senior Advocacy Officer, Australian Veterinary Association; Founding Director, Veterinary and Community Care
	Dr Joanne Coombe	Chief Veterinary Officer, NSW Department of Primary Industries

Date	Name	Position and Organisation
	Mr Scott Hansen	Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries
	Mr Rob Kelly <i>(via videoconference)</i>	Executive Director, Regional Delivery, Local Land Services, Department of Regional NSW
	Mr Brett Whitworth	Deputy Secretary, Office of Local Government, NSW Department of Planning and Environment
Thursday 14 December 2023 Inverell Shire Council Chambers, Inverell	Dr Jo Hoad	Director/Owner, Uralla Veterinary Clinic
	Dr Greg Powell	Owner, Inverell Veterinary Clinic
	Dr Glen Borrowdale	Inverell Veterinary Clinic
	Dr Hannah Fotheringham	Inverell Veterinary Clinic
	Mr Sam Baker	Community member, pastoralist and business owner
	Mr Henry Burridge	Farm manager
Thursday 4 April 2024 Charles Sturt University Convention Centre, Wagga Wagga	Dr Ken Jacobs	Veterinarian
	Dr Sarah Pollard-Williams <i>(via videoconference)</i>	Veterinarian
	Professor Shane Raidal	Professor in Veterinary Pathobiology, Charles Sturt University
	Professor Sharanne Raidal	Professor in Equine Medicine, Charles Sturt University

Appendix 3 Minutes

Minutes no. 2

2.05 pm, Monday 19 June 2023

Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW

Room 814, Parliament House, Sydney

1. Members present

Mr Banasiak, *Chair*

Ms Hurst, *Deputy Chair*

Ms Boyd (participating for the duration of the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales)

Mrs Mitchell (until 3.12 pm)

Mr Murphy (until 2.53 pm, from 3.53 pm)

Mr Primrose

2. Apologies

Mr Donnelly

Mr Martin

3. Previous minutes

The committee noted that the draft minutes no. 1 were previously confirmed by email on 13 June 2023, as per a previous resolution of the committee.

4. Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

4.1 Provision of documents to participating member

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That Ms Boyd, who has advised the committee that she intends to participate for the duration of the inquiry into veterinary workforce shortage in NSW, be provided with copies of meeting papers, unpublished submissions and other inquiry related documents.

4.2 Recording of private briefing for note taking purposes

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the secretariat records the private briefing with key stakeholders for the purposes of assisting the secretariat's note taking, and that the recording be destroyed once the notes have been circulated to the committee.

4.3 Private briefing

The following organisations and individuals each gave a short presentation followed by questions from the committee:

- Australian Veterinary Association
 - Dr Zachary Lederhose, NSW President
 - Dr Cristy Secombe, Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs
- NSW Farmers Association
 - Kathy Rankin, A/Head Policy and Advocacy
 - Georgina Trowbrige, Policy Adviser, Agricultural Industries
- RSPCA NSW
 - Dr Liz Arnott, Chief Veterinarian
- Sentient, The Veterinary Institute for Animal Ethics
 - Dr Rosemary Elliott, President (via videoconference)
- Dr Debbie Neutze, independent vet
- The Australasian Veterinary Boards Council Inc
 - Dr Peter Gibbs, Chair (via videoconference)
 - Dr Susan Keane, Head of Sustainable Practice (via videoconference)

5. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 5.15 pm

Sarah Newlands
Committee Clerk

Minutes no. 3

Tuesday, 29 August 2023

Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW

Macquarie Room, Sydney, 9.05 am

1. Members present

Mr Banasiak, *Chair*

Ms Hurst, *Deputy Chair*

Ms Boyd (participating) (until 1.53 pm, returned 2.49 pm)

Mr Donnelly

Mr Fang (substituting for Mr Martin) (until 1.53 pm, returned 3.12 pm)

Mrs Mitchell

Mr Murphy

Mr Primrose (until 12.38 pm)

2. Previous minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That draft minutes no. 2 be confirmed.

3. Correspondence

The committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Received

- 8 June 2023 – Email from Nathen77, to the secretariat, seeking an investigation into ASIC and wishing to make a complaint about Transurban
- 22 June 2023 – Email from NinthLife Foundation, to Chair, declining to make a submission to the vet workforce shortage inquiry
- 10 July 2023 – Email from Mr Danny Lachevre, Fanforce Films, to secretariat, enquiring about filming the vet workforce shortage hearings for a documentary about the vet industry
- 21 July 2023 – Letter from Mr Stephen Brady, Managing Director, TAFE, to Chair, outlining how TAFE courses are being adapted to meet the needs of the animal care industry
- 28 July 2023 – Email from Ms Harriet Skinner, Executive Assistant, Office of the Director General, Department of Primary Industries, to secretariat, advising that the department will not be making a submission to the vet workforce shortages inquiry
- 28 July 2023 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber, President, Sydney Pet Rescue and Adoption, to secretariat, outlining her complaints concerning medication dispensed by a veterinary hospital
- 16 August 2023 – Email from Ms Mary Anderson to secretariat, advising she is unable to attend the hearing for the vet workforce shortage inquiry
- 17 August 2023 – Email from Ms Cheryl Mercer, Assistant Director, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, to secretariat, declining the invitation for the department to attend the hearing for the vet workforce shortage inquiry
- 17 August 2023 – Email from Mr Damian Thomas, Interim Chief Executive, Local Government NSW, to secretariat, advising that a representative of Local Government NSW is unavailable to attend the hearing for the vet workforce shortage inquiry
- 17 August 2023 – Email from Ms Claire Harrison, Senior Project Officer, Wildlife Health Australia, to secretariat, advising that a representative of Wildlife Health Australia is unavailable to attend the hearing for the vet workforce shortage inquiry

- 18 August 2023 – Email from Ms Alice Rummery, Manager, Government Services, Office of the Secretary, Department of Planning and Environment, to secretariat, advising there is no nominee from National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Planning and Environment, to attend the hearing for the vet workforce shortage inquiry
- 21 August 2023 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber, President, Sydney Pet Rescue and Adoption, to secretariat, requesting a further extension for making a submission to the vet workforce shortage inquiry, until 30 September 2023
- 21 August 2023 – Email from Ms Tas Bindi, to secretariat, requesting a further extension for making a submission to the vet workforce shortage inquiry, until 30 September 2023.

Sent

- 20 June 2023 – Letter from Chair, to Mr Stephen Albin, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League NSW, advising of the annual inquiry into charitable organisations approved under s 34B of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*, and requesting that on publication, the 2022-23 annual report of the Animal Welfare League NSW be provided to Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW
- 20 June 2023 – Letter from Chair, to Mr Steve Coleman, Chief Executive Officer, RSPCA NSW, advising of the annual inquiry into charitable organisations approved under s 34B of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*, and requesting that on publication, the 2022-23 annual report of the RSPCA NSW be provided to Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW
- 30 June 2023 – Email from secretariat, to Ms Michelle Alber, President, Sydney Pet Rescue and Adoption, approving her request for an extension until 30 August for providing a submission to the vet workforce shortage inquiry
- 30 June 2023 – Email from secretariat, to Ms Tas Bindi, journalist, approving her request for an extension until 30 August for providing a submission to the vet workforce shortage inquiry
- 27 July 2023 – Email from secretariat, to Danny Lachevre, Fanforce Films, advising that the committee has no objections to filming around the committee table at the veterinary shortage inquiry hearings; that witnesses will be advised they may be filmed, and providing him with a copy of the broadcasting resolution.

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That the committee authorise the publication of correspondence from Mr Stephen Brady, Managing Director, TAFE, outlining how TAFE courses are being adapted to meet the needs of the animal care industry, dated 21 July 2023.

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That the committee keep the correspondence and attachments from Ms Michelle Alber, dated 28 July 2023, confidential, as per the recommendation of the secretariat, as they contain potential adverse mention.

4. Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

4.1 Public Submissions

The committee noted that the following submissions were published by the committee clerk under the authorisation of the resolution appointing the committee: submission nos. 2, 4-8, 11, 17, 17a, 19, 21, 22, 24, 30-34, 36, 43, 48, 50-53, 60-62, 64, 65, 67, 71-73, 76, 77, 79-81, 83, 85, 87-94, 100-102, 104-106, 108, 110-115, 117-122, 128-132, 136, 138 -145, 148-153, 156, 158, 159, 159a, 160 - 162, 164, 165, 167, 169-172, 175, 176, 179, 181, 184, 189, 193-195, 197, 199-205, 207-209.

4.2 Partially confidential submissions

The committee noted that following submissions were partially published by the committee clerk under the authorisation of the resolution appointing the committee: submission nos. 3, 9, 10, 13-15, 18, 20, 23, 25-27, 29, 35, 37, 39-41, 44, 47, 49, 54, 56-58, 63, 66, 68-70, 74, 74a, 74b, 75, 82, 84, 86, 95-99, 103, 107, 109, 116, 123-127, 133-135, 146, 147, 154, 155, 163, 166, 168, 173, 177, 178, 180, 182, 183, 186-188, 191, 196, 198, 206.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Donnelly: That the committee keep the following information confidential, as per the request of the author: names in submissions nos. 3, 9, 10, 13-15, 18, 20, 23, 25 - 27, 29, 35, 37,

39–41, 44, 47, 49, 54, 56-58, 63, 66, 68-70, 74, 74a, 74b, 75, 82, 84, 86, 95-99, 103, 107, 109, 116, 123-127, 133-135, 146, 147, 154, 155, 163, 166, 168, 173, 177, 178, 180, 182, 183, 186-188, 191, 196, 198, 206.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the committee authorise the publication of submission nos. 12, 78 and 190 with the exception of identifying and/or sensitive information which is to remain confidential, as per the request of the author.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the committee authorise the publication of submission no. 28 with the exception of identifying information which is to remain confidential, as per the recommendation of the secretariat.

4.3 Confidential submissions

Resolved on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That the committee keep submission nos. 16, 38, 42, 45, 46, 55, 59, 137, 145a, 157, 174, 185, 192 confidential, as per the request of the authors.

4.4 Request from documentary maker to film vet inquiry hearings

The Committee noted as previously agreed via email, Mr Danny Lachevre of FanForce Films, will be filming the hearings for the vet shortages inquiry from around the table for a documentary on the veterinary industry. The committee noted that witnesses have been informed prior to their appearance at the hearing that they may be filmed for the purposes of the documentary. This is in addition to the usual public broadcast and potential media presence, which are permitted under the broadcast resolution of 19 October 2022 (unless resolved otherwise).

4.5 Submission extension requests

The committee noted that the Chair will grant all submission extension deadline requests received before the end of September 2023.

4.6 Public hearing

Witnesses, the public and the media were admitted at 9.15 am.

The Chair made an opening statement regarding the broadcasting of the proceedings and other matters.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Dr Debbie Neutze, Veterinary Industry Consultant
- Dr Sandra Hodgins, Senior Veterinarian, Hospital Superintendent and Director, Summer Hill Village Vet
- Mr Mudher Al-Rahmani, Practice Manager, Vets for Pets
- Dr Rosemary Elliott, President, Sentient, The Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics
- Dr Georgia Ladmore, Veterinarian (via videoconference).

Dr Hodgins tendered the following document:

- Supporting data as at 17 August 2023.

Mr Al-Rahmani tendered the following document:

- Opening statement

Dr Elliott tendered the following document:

- Opening statement.

Dr Ladmore tendered the following document:

- Opening statement.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Dr Isaac Graham, Individual, Associate Veterinarian (via videoconference)
- Dr Erica Kennedy, Owner and Veterinarian, Western Rivers Veterinary Group.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Mrs Caroline Winter, Journalist, Podcast series, Sick As A Dog
- Mr Garry Putland, Founder, Sophie's Legacy
- Dr Jocelyn Birch Baker, Consultant, Smooth Operating Vets and practice owner (via videoconference).

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Mr Michael Donnelly, President, Animal Care Australia
- Ms Karri Nadazdy, Horse and Livestock Representative, Animal Care Australia
- Mrs Ellie Robertson, Individual.

Mr Donnelly tendered the following document:

- NSW Vet workforce shortage inquiry - Opening statement.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Dr Stephen Van Mil, Chief Executive Officer, Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital
- Mr Matt French, Head of Wildlife Welfare, Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIRES).

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Mr Stephen Albin, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League NSW
- Dr Liz Arnott, Chief Veterinarian RSPCA NSW
- Dr Ann-Margret Withers, Senior Manager, Outreach Programs, RSPCA NSW.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Ms Kathy Rankin, A/Head of Policy and Advocacy, NSW Farmers
- Dr Robyn Alders AO, Member, NSW Farmers
- Mr Rob Cooper, Chair, NSW Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel
- Professor Ian Lean, Member, NSW Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel.

Dr Alders tendered the following document:

- NSW Farmers opening statement – 29 July 2023.

Professor Lean tendered the following document:

- Food animal veterinary medicine: whereto and why?, Australian Vet Journal, Vol 76, September 1998.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined.

- Dr Brett Hodgkin, Chief Veterinary Officer, VetPartners
- Ms Alexandra Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, PetSure
- Dr Claire Jenkins, Veterinarian, Founder and CEO, VetChat

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 5.15 pm. The public and the media withdrew.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Donnelly: That the committee accept and publish the following documents tendered during the public hearing:

- Supporting data as at 17 August 2023
- Opening Statement – Mr Al-Rahmani
- Opening statement – Dr Elliott
- Opening statement – Dr Ladmore
- Opening statement – Mr Donnelly
- NSW Farmers opening statement – 29 July 2023.

5. Adjournment

The committee adjourned at 5.16 pm until 30 August 2023 (second public hearing – vet industry workforce).

Sarah Newlands

Committee Clerk

Minutes no. 4

Wednesday, 30 August 2023

Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW

Macquarie Room, Sydney, 9.18 am

1. Members present

Mr Banasiak, *Chair*

Ms Hurst, *Deputy Chair*

Ms Boyd (participating) (until 3.00 pm)

Mr Donnelly

Mr Fang (substituting for Mr Martin from 1.31 pm)

Mr Martin (until 12.32 pm)

Mrs Mitchell

Mr Murphy

2. Apologies

Mr Primrose

3. Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

3.1 Public hearing

Witnesses, the public and the media were admitted at 9.28 am.

The Chair made an opening statement regarding the broadcasting of the proceedings and other matters.

The following witness was sworn and examined:

- Ms Kristina Vesk, Chief Executive Officer, Cat Protection Society.

The evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Mr Gary Fitzgerald, President, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia
- Dr Patricia Clarke, Member, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia)
- Dr Courtney Baskerville, Chair, The Veterinary Nursing Research Group.

Dr Patricia Clarke tendered the following documents:

- Advanced Skills for Higher Education Veterinary Allied Health Professionals.
- RCVS publishes Workforce Action Plan setting out how the sector can work together to mitigate crisis, Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, UK

- Inter-Professional Practice: From Veterinarian to the Veterinary Team; Journal of Veterinary Medicine, Volume 4, 2014.

Dr Baskerville tendered the following documents:

- Options for registration of Veterinary Nurses – Australasian Veterinary Boards Council
- Suicides and deaths of undetermined intent among veterinary professionals from 2003 to 2014. JAVMA volume 255 September 2019.
- New Zealand veterinary practice staff utilisation, 2022 conference proceedings of the Veterinary Business Branch of the NZVA.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Professor Jacqueline Norris, Member, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand; Dean and Head of School, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, The University of Sydney
- Mr Tim Payne, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President, The University of Sydney
- Dr Geoffrey Dutton, Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University (via videoconference)
- Professor Jon Hill, Executive Dean, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Southern Cross University.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witness was sworn and examined:

- Mr Mark Slater, Director, Animal Services Australasia.

The evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

Mr Slater tendered the following document:

- Rescue Australia: A proposal for an emergency wildlife rescue pilot program.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Dr Steven Ferguson, President, Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW
- Dr John Baguley, Registrar, Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW
- Dr Julie Strous, Executive Director, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council
- Dr Mark Simpson, Immediate Past Chair, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Dr Zachary Lederhose, NSW Division President, Australian Veterinary Association
- Dr Cristy Secombe, Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs, Australian Veterinary Association
- Dr Robyn Whitaker, Senior Advocacy Officer, Australian Veterinary Association; Founding Director, Veterinary and Community Care (via videoconference).

Dr Lederhose tendered the following document:

- Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW.

Dr Whitaker tendered the following document:

- Veterinary Social Work.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Dr Joanne Coombe, Chief Veterinary Officer, NSW Department of Primary Industries

- Mr Scott Hansen, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries
- Mr Rob Kelly, Executive Director, Regional Delivery, Local Land Services, Department of Regional NSW (via videoconference)
- Mr Brett Whitworth, Deputy Secretary, Office of Local Government, NSW Department of Planning and Environment.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 4.45 pm. The public and the media withdrew.

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That the committee accept and publish the following documents tendered during the public hearing:

- Advanced Skills for Higher Education Veterinary Allied Health Professionals
- Rescue Australia: A proposal for an emergency wildlife rescue pilot program
- Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW
- Veterinary social work.

4. **Adjournment**

The committee adjourned at 4.47 pm *sine die*.

Sarah Newlands
Committee Clerk

Minutes no. 8

Monday 20 November 2023
Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW
Hospital Road, Parliament House, 9.15 am

1. **Members present**

Mr Banasiak (*Chair*)
Ms Hurst (*Deputy Chair*)
Mrs Mitchell
Mr Murphy (until 11.12 am)

2. **Apologies**

Ms Boyd
Mr Donnelly
Mr Martin
Mr Primrose

3. **Previous minutes**

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That draft minutes nos. 6 and 7 be confirmed.

4. **Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales**

4.1 **Site visit to the Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Camperdown**

The committee visited the Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Camperdown campus, and met with the following stakeholders:

- Professor Jacqueline Norris, Dean/Head of School
- Professor Paul Sheehy, Deputy Head of School
- Ms Richa Kamrah, Head of Operations,
- Ms Tamara Kirby, School Manager

- Ms Katrina Walker, Clinical Skills Coordinator
- Ms Amy Draper, Clinical Skills Coordinator
- Ms Alyssa Matthews, Clinical Skills Coordinator
- Mr Lance Proctor, Technical Officer
- Mr James Maxwell, Technical Officer
- Associate Professor Craig Ruaux, Small Animal Internal Medicine, The University Veterinary Teaching Hospital
- Associate Professor Peter Bennett, Oncology and Small Animal Medicine, The University Veterinary Teaching Hospital
- Associate Professor Natalie Courtman, *Specialist Veterinary Clinical Pathologist*, Veterinary Pathology and Diagnostic Services Laboratory
- Ms Ignacia Meza, Technical Manager (Lab Manager), Veterinary Pathology and Diagnostic Services Laboratory
- Ms Maira Meggiolaro, Molecular Diagnostics (Technician), Veterinary Pathology and Diagnostic Services Laboratory.

The site visit concluded at 11.28 am.

The committee conducted a private meeting.

5. Correspondence

The committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Received:

- 8 September 2023 – Email from Mr Tim Payne, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, The University of Sydney, to secretariat, clarifying evidence provided at the hearing on 30 August 2023
- 28 September 2023 – Email from Professor Jacqueline Norris, Dean, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, The University of Sydney, to secretariat, clarifying evidence provided at the hearing on 30 August 2023
- 28 September – Email from Ms Michelle Alber, President, Sydney Pet Rescue and Adoption to secretariat, requesting an extension to the submission deadline
- 28 September 2023 – Email from Ms Tas Bindi to secretariat, requesting an extension to the submission deadline
- 5 October 2023 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber, President, Sydney Pet Rescue and Adoption to secretariat, requesting an extension to the submission deadline
- 12 October 2023 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber, President, Sydney Pet Rescue and Adoption to secretariat, requesting an extension to the submission deadline
- 13 October 2023 – Email from Ms Tas Bindi to secretariat, requesting an extension to the submission deadline
- 19 October 2023 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber, President, Sydney Pet Rescue and Adoption to secretariat, requesting an extension to the submission deadline
- 26 October 2023 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber, President, Sydney Pet Rescue and Adoption to secretariat, requesting an extension to the submission deadline
- 10 November 2023 – Email from the Australian Veterinary Association providing additional information on the costings for the Mental Health line.

Sent:

- 1 November 2023 – Email from Budget Estimates secretariat to Hon Stephen Kamper MP, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Lands and Property, Minister for Multiculturalism, and Minister for Sport, issuing uncorrected transcript, questions on notice, and supplementary questions from hearing on 24 October 2023
- 1 November 2023 – Email from Budget Estimates secretariat to Hon Tara Moriarty MLC, Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Regional New South Wales, and Minister for Western New South Wales, issuing

uncorrected transcript, questions on notice, and supplementary questions from hearing on 25 October 2023.

6. Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

6.1 Submissions

The committee noted that submissions nos. 160a and 210 were published by the Committee Clerk under the resolution appointing the committee.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the committee keep the following information confidential as per the request of the author: name/s and/or identifying information in submission no. 211.

6.2 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

The following answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions were published by the Committee Clerk under the authorisation of the resolution appointing the committee:

- Animal Services Australasia, received 5 September 2023
- Dr Debbie Neutze, received 7 September 2023
- NSW Dairy Action Plan Implementation Panel, received 14 September 2023
- Dr Georgia Ladmore, received 19 September 2023
- VetPartners, received 20 September 2023
- Mr Mudher Al-Rahmani, received 22 September 2023
- Mrs Ellie Robertson, received 23 September 2023
- Dr Isaac Graham, received 24 September 2023
- WIRES, received 25 September 2023
- Animal Welfare League, received 26 September 2023
- PetSure, received 26 September 2023
- RSPCA NSW, received 26 September 2023
- VetChat, received 26 September 2023
- Ms Caroline Winter and Mr Gary Putland, received 26 September 2023
- Dr Erica Kennedy, received 27 September 2023
- Dr Sandra Hodgins, received 27 September 2023
- School of Veterinary Sciences, Charles Sturt University, received 27 September 2023
- Veterinary Nursing Research Group, received 28 September 2023
- Local Land Services, Department of Regional NSW, received 28 September 2023
- School of Veterinary Science, The University of Sydney, received 28 September 2023
- Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW, received 28 September 2023
- Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, received 28 September 2023
- Sentient, received 28 September 2023
- Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education, 29 September 2023
- Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, received 29 September 2023
- Australian Veterinary Association, received 29 September 2023
- Cat Protection Society, received 29 September 2023
- Department of Primary Industries, received 29 September 2023
- Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education, received 29 September 2023
- Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, received 29 September 2023
- NSW Farmers, received 16 October 2023.

6.3 Public hearing in Inverell

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That the public hearing in Inverell on 14 December 2023 not be broadcast/livestreamed.

The private meeting concluded at 11.30 am.

6.4 Site visit to the Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Camden

The committee visited the Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Camden campus, and met with the following stakeholders:

- Professor Paul Sheehy, Deputy Head of School
- Ms Colleen Ritchard, University Veterinary Teaching Hospital Manager
- Associate Professor Annabelle Olsson, Unit Head, Avian, Reptile and Exotic Pet Hospital
- Dr Jenni Green, Clinical Director and Small Animal Veterinarian, University Veterinary Teaching Hospital
- Dr Marta Wereszka, Senior Registrar in Equine Surgery, Equine Centre
- Mr James Bell, Sydney Agriculture and Environment Farms and Facilities
- Mr Stuart Glover, Technical Assistant
- Dr Tony Mogg, *Senior Lecturer in Equine Medicine*
- Mr Greg Hogan Supervisor
- Mr Keith Tribe, Technical Officer
- Ms Hannah Edgell, Student
- Ms Maddison Greene, Student
- Ms Elena Mitchell, Student
- Ms Alexandra Norris, Student
- Mr Harry Sollom, Student
- Ms Cordelia Jerjen, Student.

7. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 5.31 pm until 6.30 am, Thursday 14 December (regional visit and hearing in Inverell).

Sarah Newlands
Committee Clerk

Minutes no. 11

Thursday, 14 December 2023

Portfolio Committee No.4 – Regional NSW

Execujet Flight Lounge, 394 Ross Smith Avenue Mascot, 6.24 am

1. Members present

Mr Banasiak, *Chair*
Ms Merton (substituting for Mrs Mitchell)
Mr Murphy
Mr Primrose

2. Apologies

Ms Boyd
Mr Donnelly
Ms Hurst
Mr Martin

3. Previous minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Murphy: That draft minutes no. 8 be confirmed.

4. Correspondence

The committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Received

- 10 November 2023 – Letter from the Australian Veterinary Association, to secretariat providing further information on mental health funding for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales on 14 December 2023
- 23 November 2023 – Email from Mr Wal Broun, to secretariat, declining the invitation to appear at the hearing for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales on 14 December 2023
- 27 November 2023 – Email from Ms Karen Zirkler, to secretariat, declining the invitation to appear at the hearing for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales on 14 December 2023.

Sent

- 27 November 2023 – Letter from Chair, to Professor Jacqui Norris, Dean/Head of School, Sydney School of Veterinary Sciences, University of Sydney, thanking her and the staff and students for hosting the committee on their visit on 20 November 2023
- 4 December 2023 – Letter from the Chair, to Hon Adam Marshall MP, Member for Northern Tablelands, advising that the committee will be visiting Inverell for site visits and a hearing for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW
- Veterinary Association, providing additional information on mental health program costs, dated 10 November 2023.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Primrose: That the committee authorise the publication of correspondence from the Australian Veterinary Association, providing additional information on mental health program costs, dated 10 November 2023.

5. Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales**5.1 Submissions**

Committee noted that the following submission was published by the committee clerk under the authorisation of the resolution appointing the committee: submission no. 212.

5.2 Site visit to Wagga Wagga

Committee noted that as agreed via email, the committee will conduct a site visit to Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga on 3-4 April 2024.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Primrose: That all costs associated with Ms Boyd's participation in the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales be covered by the committee.

5.3 In camera hearing

The committee proceeded to take *in camera* evidence. Persons present other than the committee: Ms Tina Higgins, Ms Sarah Newlands, Ms Flax Soetjandra, Mr Gareth Perkins and Hansard Reporters.

Witnesses were admitted.

The Chair made an opening statement regarding the proceedings and other matters.

The following witness was sworn and examined:

- veterinarian
- veterinarian
- veterinarian.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The *in camera* hearing concluded at 9.44 am.

5.4 Public hearing

Witnesses, the public and the media were admitted at 9.50 am.

The Chair made an opening statement.

The following witness was sworn and examined:

- Dr Jo Hoad, veterinarian and practice owner.

The evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Dr Greg Powell, veterinarian and practice owner
- Dr Glen Borrowdale, veterinarian
- Dr Hannah Fotheringham, veterinarian.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Mr Sam Baker, community member, pastoralist and business owner
- Mr Henry Burridge, farm manager.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 11.20 am. The public and the media withdrew.

5.5 Site visit to Inverell Veterinary Clinic and Gowrie Vet Clinic

The committee visited two clinics in Inverell and meet with owners and staff:

Inverell Veterinary Clinic:

- Dr Greg Powell, veterinarian and owner
- Dr Glen Borrowdale, veterinarian.

Gowrie Vet Clinic:

- Dr Gundi Rhoades, veterinarian and owner
- Dr Brooke Bone, veterinarian
- Dr Sarah Golding, veterinarian
- Dr Lyddy Van Gyen, veterinarian
- Ms Maddi Clynch, veterinary nurse
- Ms Emma Young, receptionist.

6. Adjournment

The committee adjourned at 1.30 pm until 20 February 2024.

Sarah Newlands

Committee Clerk

Minutes no. 14

Thursday 4 April 2024

Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW

Bolton on the Park, Wagga Wagga, at 8.00 am

1. Members present

Mr Banasiak, *Chair*

Ms Hurst, *Deputy Chair*

Mr Fang (substituting for Mr Martin, until 2.49 pm)

Mrs Mitchell (until 2.49 pm)

Mr Murphy (via videoconference, from 1.50 pm)

Mr Primrose

2. Apologies

Ms Boyd
Mr Donnelly

3. Previous minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Primrose: That draft minutes no. 11 be confirmed.

4. Correspondence

The committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Received:

- 10 March 2024 – Email from Dr Hannah Fotheringham, Inverell Vet Clinic, to secretariat, clarifying information she provided at a hearing of the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in Inverell on 14 December 2023.

Sent:

- 14 March 2024 – Letter from Chair, to Dr Joe McGirr MP, Member for Wagga Wagga, advising of the committee's visit to his electorate on 4 April 2024.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Primrose: That:

- the correspondence from Dr Hannah Fotheringham providing clarifications to her evidence at the Portfolio Committee No.4 – Regional NSW inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales hearing on 14 December 2023 be published
- a footnote at the relevant points in the transcript on 14 December 2023 be inserted noting that correspondence clarifying the evidence had been received and providing a hyperlink to the published correspondence.

5. Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales**5.1 Report deliberative meeting and tabling dates**

Committee to note that as agreed over email:

- the report deliberative meeting will be held at 10 am on Tuesday 25 June 2024
- the report tabling is Friday 28 June 2024.

5.2 Site visit to Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga

The committee visited the veterinary teaching facilities of Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, and met with the following staff:

- Ms Samantha Beresford, Head Government Relations and Regional Engagement
- Mr Joe Price, Animal and Field Manager, Faculty of Science
- Dr Geoff Dutton, Associate Head of School (Veterinary Sciences)/Senior Lecturer in Veterinary Anatomy
- Associate Professor Jennifer Clulow, Associate Professor in Theriogenology
- Professor Kris Hughes, Professor in Equine Medicine/Clinical Director
- Dr Esther Callcott, Senior Lecturer in Veterinary Technology
- Dr Michelle Eastwood, Course Director, Veterinary Science and Veterinary Technology
- Professor Megan Smith, Executive Dean, Faculty of Science and Health
- Professor Hayley Randle, Head of School, School of Agriculture, Environment and Veterinary Sciences.

The committee also met with:

- Students studying for a Bachelor of Veterinary Technology
- Students studying for a Bachelor of Veterinary Science.

5.3 Public hearing

Witnesses, the public and the media were admitted.

The Chair made an opening statement regarding the broadcasting of proceedings and other matters.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Dr Ken Jacobs, Veterinarian
- Dr Sarah Pollard-Williams, Veterinarian (via videoconference).

Dr Jacobs tendered the following document:

- *Day One Competencies, Version 1: January 2024*, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were sworn and examined:

- Professor Shane Raidal, Professor in Veterinary Pathobiology, Charles Sturt University
- Professor Sharanne Raidal, Professor in Equine Medicine, Charles Sturt University.

The evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 3.27 pm. The public and the media withdrew.

5.4 Tendered documents

Resolved on the motion of Mr Primrose: That the committee accept and publish the following document tendered during the public hearing:

- *Day One Competencies, Version 1: January 2024*, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.

5.5 Thank you to staff at Charles Sturt University

The Chair thanked the staff of Charles Sturt University for their support organising the site visit and hearing.

6. Adjournment

The committee adjourned at 3.29 pm until Friday 26 April 2024, Macquarie Room, Parliament House (public hearing - 2023 Inquiry into the operation of approved charitable organisations under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*).

Sarah Newlands
Committee Clerk

Minutes no. 15

Friday 26 April 2024

Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW

Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney, 8.59 am

1. Members present

Mr Banasiak, Chair
Ms Hurst, Deputy Chair
Ms Boyd (participating, via videoconference)
Mr Donnelly
Mrs MacDonald (substituting for Mr Martin)
Mr Fang (substituting for Mrs Mitchell)
Mr Murphy
Mr Primrose

2. Correspondence

The committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Received:

- ***

- 2 April 2024 – Email from Dr Sarah Pollard-Williams, veterinarian, to the secretariat, providing her opening statement for the hearing on 4 April 2024 for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales.
- ***
- 8 April 2024 – Email from Ms Bonnie Tritton, veterinary student, to the committee, providing further input to the committee post their visit to Charles Sturt University for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales.
- 13 April 2024 – Email from Dr Sarah Pollard Williams, veterinarians, to the secretariat, requesting her opening statement be published in full for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales.
- ***

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Murphy: That the committee authorise the publication of correspondence from Ms Bonnie Tritton, veterinary student, providing further input to the committee post their visit to Charles Sturt University for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales, dated 8 April 2024.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the committee authorise the publication of the opening statement from Dr Sarah Pollard-Williams for the hearing on 4 April 2024 for the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales, dated 2 April 2024.

3. Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

3.1 Confidential submissions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Donnelly: That the committee keep submission nos. 149a and 213 confidential, as per the request of the authors, as they contain identifying and/or sensitive information; and as per the recommendation of the secretariat, as they contain potential adverse mention.

4. ***

5. Adjournment

The committee adjourned at 5.11 pm *sine die*.

Elsbeth Dyer
Committee Clerk

Minutes no. 16

Thursday 9 May 2024

Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW

LC Members' Lounge, NSW Parliament House, 12.37 pm

1. Members present

Mr Banasiak, Chair
Ms Hurst, Deputy Chair
Mr Donnelly
Mr Fang
Mr Murphy
Mr Primrose

2. Apologies

Ms Boyd
Mrs MacDonald

3. Previous minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That draft minutes no. 15 be confirmed.

4. Correspondence

The committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Received

- ***
- 25 April 2024 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber, outlining her concerns about a veterinary hospital and the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, as part of the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage
- 26 April 2024 – Letter from Dr Callcott and Professor Smith, Charles Sturt University, providing information on veterinary technologists, as part of the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage
- ***

Sent

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Donnelly: That the committee keep the correspondence and attachments from Ms Michelle Alber regarding concerns with a veterinary hospital and the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW, dated 25 April 2024 confidential, as per the request of the author.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Primrose: That the committee authorise the publication of correspondence from Dr Callcot and Professor Smith, Charles Sturt University, regarding information on veterinary technologists, dated 26 April 2024.

5. *****6. Adjournment**

12.52 pm

Peta Leemen

Committee Clerk

Draft minutes no. 20

Tuesday 25 June 2024

Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW

Room 1043, Parliament House, Sydney at 9.59 am

1. Members present

Mr Banasiak, *Chair*

Ms Hurst, *Deputy Chair*

Mr Donnelly

Mr Fang (substituting for Mrs Mitchell for the 2023 Inquiry into the operation of the approved charitable organisations under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*) (until 10.02 am)

Mrs MacDonald (via videoconference)

Mrs Mitchell (via videoconference) (from 10.01 am)

Mr Murphy

Mr Primrose

2. Apologies

Ms Boyd

3. Previous minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Donnelly: That draft minutes no. 14 be confirmed.

4. Correspondence

The committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Received

- 20 June 2024 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber to secretariat providing information to the inquiry about the treatment of her cat at a veterinary hospital, including attachments
- 20 June 2024 – Email from Ms Michelle Alber to secretariat suggesting recommendations to the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales
- ***

Resolved on the motion of Mr Primrose: That the correspondence and attachments from Ms Michelle Alber to the secretariat, dated 20 June 2024, be kept confidential as per the author's previous request and the recommendation of the secretariat as they contain sensitive/identifying information.

5. Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

5.1 Consideration of the Chair's draft report

The Chair submitted his draft report entitled *Veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales*, which, having been previously circulated, was taken as being read.

Chapter 2

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 2.29 be amended by inserting 'sometimes' after 'organisation'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 2.57 be amended by inserting at the end:

'The Animal Welfare League gave similar evidence, noting that:

It is not intended that the Animal Care Truck replace veterinary practices. We have noticed that good relations with local veterinary practices lead to higher uptake of Animal Care Truck services. Local veterinarians are also important to provide follow up care in the event that the truck has done surgery work and left the area. The truck could be particularly effective in areas that have a veterinary practice, but that practice is suffering a veterinary shortage. It could be used as an emergency measure for areas without a local practice but the issue of access to follow up care would still need to be addressed.' [FOOTNOTE: Submission 94, Animal Welfare League, p 9.]

'The Animal Welfare League also highlighted the potential benefits their mobile vet truck could provide in terms of desexing, but expressed frustration as to their inability to offer these much-needed services in many areas:

You can't get approval, unless you're in a pound doing the desexings, to actually do the work on the truck. Last week we went to Deniliquin, Broken Hill and then back to Young. The issue is that in places like Broken Hill, RSPCA vet clinics are getting refurbished, I understand. In other places, like Parkes, there are no vets. We could easily do the desexings and the surgery there, but we just can't get the licences. That's the major regulatory impediment, because we're a mobile vet truck.' [FOOTNOTE: Evidence, Mr Stephen Albin, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League NSW, 29 August 2023, p 46.]

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the following new paragraphs be inserted after paragraph 2.63:

'Sentient expressed a similar view, noting that right now complaints 'can only be investigated on an individual basis rather than considering the impact working conditions and management (including bullying) may have had on the matter'. They argued for 'a review of veterinary practice legislation to allow

the Veterinary Practitioners Board to address complaints systemically, and to move beyond a merely disciplinary focus because 'without addressing practice processes and culture, these will remain as underlying causes of further complaints'. [FOOTNOTE: Answers to supplementary questions on notice, Sentient, 28 September 2023, p 3.]

Mrs Ellie Robertson expressed the view that there should be an 'easy and fair process for members of the public to make complaints' regarding a vet or veterinary practices, noting the significant amount of fees clients pay for veterinary services:

There are avenues and processes for lodging complaints for most services and products and I don't see this as any different. We pay exorbitant fees to care for our animals and we are entitled, and within our rights, to be able to lodge a complaint where necessary. I think a Veterinarian Ombudsman would be a good idea. Or perhaps once an Independent Office Of Animal Protection has been established, a department within this office could be responsible for processing, investigation and actioning complaints.' [FOOTNOTE: Answer to questions on notice, Mrs Ellie Roberston, 23 September 2023, p 4.]

Mr Murphy moved: That paragraph 2.78 be amended by omitting 'particularly if governments fail to meet at least some of the cost of delivering veterinary care' after 'On balance, the committee is concerned that it is likely that the sector will become reluctant to meet this public good.'

Question put and negatived.

Mr Murphy moved: That Finding 3 be amended by omitting 'that is not currently appropriately recompensed by the NSW Government.'

Question put and negatived.

Mr Murphy moved: That paragraph 2.79 be amended by omitting 'However, the only government funding for vets to treat wildlife appears to be indirect, such as funding to wildlife hospitals and university operated wildlife clinics' and inserting instead 'The NSW Government provides significant funding to the wildlife care and rehabilitation sector, including for veterinary care. However, the committee notes that many private veterinary practices provide significant amounts of pro bono services and care to treat injured wildlife and more work needs to be done to address funding for these services.'

Ms Hurst moved: That the motion of Mr Murphy be amended by omitting the 'significant'.

Amendment of Ms Hurst put and passed.

Original question of Mr Murphy, as amended, put and passed.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Murphy: That paragraph 2.80 be amended by omitting 'The committee was disappointed by the NSW Government's decision to reverse the decision to fund the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital' and inserting instead 'The committee was disappointed by the amount of funding provided by the NSW Government to the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital.'

Mr Murphy moved: That: paragraph 2.80 and Recommendation 1 be amended by omitting 'provide dedicated ongoing funding' and inserting instead 'investigate more sustainable funding'.

Question put and negatived.

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That paragraph 2.80 and Recommendation 1 be amended by inserting 'the expansion of' before 'wildlife units at other hospitals'.

Resolved on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That Recommendation 2 be omitted 'That the NSW Government consider amending the *Companion Animals Act 1998*:

- to ensure local government authorities are obliged to collect stray animals from licensed veterinary clinics
- so that there are appropriate levels of funding provided to local government authorities to ensure that there is a consistent interpretation of the Act across all local government areas,'

and the following new recommendation be inserted instead: 'That the NSW Government consider amending the *Companion Animals Act 1998* to:

- ensure local government authorities collect stray animals from licensed veterinary clinics; and
- that appropriate funding is provided to local government authorities to ensure that there is a consistent interpretation of the Act across all local government areas.'

Resolved on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 2.85 and Recommendation 4 be amended:

- a) by inserting 'where access to vet care is often limited, and mobile vet trucks can provide a large community benefit in offering vaccination and desexing programs, as well as in emergencies such as fires and floods.' after 'regional areas'
- b) by omitting 'these clinics can' and inserting instead 'these clinics could'
- c) by inserting 'However, the committee also heard evidence about the ability for mobile vet clinics to work with and complement local veterinary clinics' after 'low fee veterinary care'
- d) by omitting 'However, on balance' and inserting 'On balance'
- e) inserting a full stop after 'distance'
- f) omitting 'and ensure that mobile clinics are not able to operate to the detriment of the local clinics' and inserting instead 'Any changes must ensure mobile clinics work collaboratively to ensure they can provide essential additional veterinary services without causing detriment to local clinics'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 2.86 and Recommendation 5 be amended by omitting 'amending' and inserting instead 'reviewing'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 2.89 and Recommendation 7 be amended by omitting 'particularly focussing on restricted acts and how best to manage these in the context of a workforce shortage' and inserting instead 'immediately following, or in conjunction with, the review of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* and associated regulations and codes.'

Chapter 3

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the following new paragraphs be inserted after paragraph 3.38:

'The AVA was also very supportive of the emerging field of 'Veterinary Social Work' as a means of reducing the mental health burden on veterinarians:

Veterinary Social Work (VSW) is an emerging field in Australia, and veterinary social workers provide the added benefit of being trained and experienced to embrace a multi-disciplinary and holistic approach to managing often complex human social needs in the context of veterinary care. The inclusion of this skill set in the clinical environment team improves the wellbeing and mental health of veterinary teams. [FOOTNOTE: Submission 144, Australian Veterinary Association, p 61.]

The AVA noted there is currently only one veterinary social worker in Australia. The AVA indicated they would like to see additional funding for this emerging field, citing a program that is already being 'piloted' through the Victorian Government [FOOTNOTE: Evidence, Dr Robyn Whitaker, Australian Veterinary Association, and Founding Director, Veterinary and Community Care, 30 August 2023, p 42.]

RSPCA NSW was also supportive of increasing the use of veterinary social workers in Australia, as a way to support the mental health of veterinary practitioners:

Managing the emotions and mental health of clients can take a significant toll on veterinary practitioners. In the USA, efforts to support veterinarians and clients has included the creation of a discipline in veterinary social work. Veterinary social work is now an established discipline in social work which assists in the delivery of veterinary care by supporting the emotional needs of the animal owner and the veterinary team to achieve good outcomes. This model shows potential for promotion in Australia and these roles could be supported particularly in practices servicing a higher proportion of vulnerable clients.' [FOOTNOTE: Submission 197, RSPCA NSW, p 17.]

Ms Hurst moved: That paragraph 3.48 be amended by inserting 'The committee recognises that subsidised vet care for low-income earners, pensioners and animal rescue groups (discussed further in Chapter 7) would alleviate some of the stress and conflict currently faced by veterinarians' after 'underscores this issue'.

Mr Donnelly moved: That the motion of Ms Hurst be amended by omitting 'would' and inserting instead 'may'.

Amendment of Mr Donnelly put and passed.

Original question of Ms Hurst, as amended, put and passed.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That Finding 6 be amended by:

- a) omitting 'by owners' and inserting instead 'by the public'
- b) omitting 'the ability of owners' and inserting instead 'the ability of clients'.

Ms Hurst moved: That Finding 10 be amended by inserting 'moral and moral and ethical challenges, particularly around the killing of healthy animals' after 'workplace culture'.

Mr Donnelly moved: That the motion of Ms Hurst be amended by omitting 'killing of healthy animals' and inserting instead 'ending of life of healthy animals'.

Amendment of Mr Donnelly put and passed.

Original question of Ms Hurst, as amended, put and passed.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the following new paragraph and new recommendation be inserted after Recommendation 10:

'The committee notes the evidence received from the Australian Veterinary Association and other key stakeholders about the emerging field of veterinary social work, and potential social workers have to reduce the mental health stress on veterinarians and manage challenging client relationships. The Committee believes this sounds very promising, and recommends the NSW Government consider how it can support and promote the establishment of the field of Veterinary Social Work in New South Wales'.

Recommendation X

That the NSW Government consider how it can support and promote the establishment of the field of Veterinary Social Work in New South Wales.'

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 3.59 be amended by:

- a) inserting 'deeply' before 'concerned'
- b) omitting 'mostly anecdotal, concerning' inserting instead 'suggesting'
- c) inserting 'The committee believes that urgent action must be taken to address suicide in the veterinary industry, and recommends that the government take steps to ensure suicide prevention programs are made available which are specifically targeted to veterinarians' after 'restricted drugs'.
- d) inserting a new Finding:

Finding X

'Suicide risks reported by the veterinary profession are highly concerning, and urgent action must be taken.'

- e) inserting a new Recommendation:

Recommendation X

'The Minister for Mental Health, in conjunction with the Minister for Agriculture, take steps to ensure suicide prevention programs are made available which are specifically targeted at veterinarians'

- f) omitting 'no recent or accurate publicly available data' inserting instead 'there is a need for more robust and update-to-date public data'.

Resolved on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the following new paragraph be inserted after Recommendation 12:

'The committee also notes evidence regarding the significant mental health concerns and high suicide rates associated within the veterinary profession, which has also been linked to their access to restricted drugs. In light of this, the committee believes that any review around 'restricted acts' must proceed with caution, and access to restricted drugs must be kept highly limited'.

Resolved on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That Recommendation 12 be amended by

- a) omitting 'concerning' inserting instead 'regarding'
 b) inserting 'and develop a framework to better support mental health of veterinarians' after 'all causal factors'.

Chapter 4

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 4.17 be amended by omitting 'This is often the case for filling veterinarian roles required for export of other produce, including live animals' after 'difficult to recruit veterinarians'.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Murphy: That paragraph 4.28 be amended by inserting 'in their written submission' after 'the Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology noted'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst:

- a) That paragraph 4.40 be amended by inserting 'for veterinarians generally, but particularly' after 'and other support'.
 b) That paragraph 4.43 and Recommendation 13 be amended by inserting 'in New South Wales, and particularly in rural and' after 'to attract and retain veterinarians'.
 c) That paragraph 4.44 and Recommendation 14 be amended by inserting 'in New South Wales, and particularly' after 'first year graduates in private practice'.

Mrs Mitchell moved: That a new Recommendation be inserted between Recommendations 12 and 13:

'Recommendation X

That the NSW Government considers providing financial incentives for veterinarians who work with livestock, to ensure an adequate number of large animal practitioners are available to support primary producers in regional areas.'

Question put.

The committee divided.

Ayes: Mr Banasiak, Mr Donnelly, Mrs MacDonald, Mrs Mitchell, Mr Murphy, Mr Primrose.

Noes: Ms Hurst.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That Recommendation 13 be amended by omitting 'student loan forgiveness' and inserting instead 'waiving HECS debt'.

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That Recommendation 14 be amended by omitting 'of' and inserting instead 'for'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That Recommendation 15 be amended by omitting 'to provide financial' and inserting instead 'consider providing'.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Murphy: That paragraph 4.49 be omitted:

'The committee is concerned to learn that the current veterinary pathology services workforce is potentially inadequate to respond to Emergency Animal Disease, and also unlikely to grow fast enough to meet future demands for diagnostic services. Coupled with evidence of closure of all but one government funded laboratory, the committee is alarmed at the NSW Department of Primary Industry's growing reliance on universities and the private sector for assistance, particularly in an emergency. Therefore, the committee seeks assurance from the NSW Government that there is a sufficient workforce of veterinary pathologists and the necessary infrastructure to meet future demands for services, including in the event of an Emergency Animal Disease outbreak. Specifically, we recommend that the NSW Government provide an assessment of the capacity of the government veterinary diagnostic services workforce, in particular veterinary pathologists, to sustain a response to an Emergency Animal Disease outbreak and to also meet projected future demands for diagnostic services', and the following new paragraph be inserted instead:

'The committee learned that the in the event of a medium-scale emergency disease outbreak, the Department of Primary Industries would partner with the private veterinary pathology services workforce and other jurisdictions as required, to increase response capacity. The NSW Department of Primary Industries collaborates with universities and the private sector, particularly in an emergency response. In the event of a biosecurity threat the committee seeks assurance from the NSW Government that there is sufficient workforce of veterinary pathologists and the necessary infrastructure to meet future demands for services, including in the event of an Emergency Animal Disease outbreak. Specially, we recommend that the NSW Government provide an assessment of the capacity of the government veterinary diagnostic services workforce, in particular veterinary pathologists, to sustain a response to an Emergency Animal Disease outbreak and to also meet projected future demands for diagnostic services.'

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That Recommendation 16 be omitted: 'That the NSW Government provide an assessment of the capacity of the government veterinary diagnostic services workforce, in particular veterinary pathologists, to sustain a response to an Emergency Animal Disease outbreak and to also meet projected future demands for diagnostic services', and the following new Recommendation be inserted instead:

'That the NSW Government conduct an assessment of the capacity of the government veterinary diagnostic services workforce, in particular veterinary pathologists, to respond to an Emergency Animal Disease outbreak and to also meet projected future demands for diagnostic services. This assessment should be publicly released'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 4.51 be amended:

- a) by omitting 'has confirmed' and inserting instead 'noted'
- b) by omitting 'now has an adequate framework in place' and inserting instead 'is working to implement a framework'
- c) by omitting 'in place'.

Chapter 5

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That a new Finding be inserted after Finding 12:

'Finding X

That further opportunities need to be provided for veterinary students and graduates to obtain an adequate understanding of large animal medicine'.

Chapter 6

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the following new paragraph be inserted after paragraph 6.28:

'Mr Gary Fitzgerald, President, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia gave similar evidence about the benefits of a regulatory framework in terms of remuneration:

With regulation and registration, I also imagine that there will come increased remuneration, which has been a chronic issue for attrition rates in veterinary nurses and technicians historically,

because they are so low paid that most of them will not stay in the profession for very long or in the industry for very long.' [FOOTNOTE: Evidence, Mr Gary Fitzgerald, President, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, 30 August 2024, p 10.]

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That Recommendation 21 be amended by inserting 'appropriate rates of pay' as a new bullet point after 'oversight by a professional board'.

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That Recommendation 23 be amended by:

- a) omitting 'or' and inserting instead 'and'
- b) omitting 'forum' and inserting instead 'forums'.

Chapter 7

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the following new paragraphs be inserted after paragraph 7.18:

'Organisations such as the Cat Protection Society, Sentient and RSPCA and the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation argued that issues regarding access to veterinary care should be viewed through a 'One Health, One Welfare' framework. For example, the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, explained that:

A robust veterinary workforce is not only critical to maintain animal health and welfare but also has major implications for human health and welfare. Veterinarians are a fundamental part of 'One Health, One Welfare' which seeks to optimize the health and welfare of people, animals and their environment and recognises the interconnection between these elements. [FOOTNOTE: Submission 167, Australian Pet Welfare Foundation Submission, p 3.]

The RSPCA further explained how the 'One Health, One Welfare' framework is relevant to considerations around access to vet care:

The one welfare concept recognises that the health and wellbeing of people is connected to the health of animals and the environment. Barriers to accessing vet care disproportionately impact vulnerable members of our community further risking their physical and mental health and threatening the welfare of their animals'. [FOOTNOTE: Submission 197, RSPCA, p 14.]

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 7.40 be amended by omitting 'Specific details about the scheme were lacking' and inserting instead 'Opinions varied as to what a 'Veticare' scheme would look like'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the following new paragraph be inserted after paragraph 7.41:

'RSPCA was highly supportive of Government-subsidised vet care, highlighting that this occurs in many other jurisdictions:

If you look all around the world, in the United States, in the UK, in Canada, even in Victoria, there are lots of models there for access to vet care that is government supported. In Victoria the Government put out a lot of grants to try to get low-cost clinics to be developed. If there was more funding then we would be able to support that need, and that would have the flow-on effects of improving animal welfare. It decreases stress on vets in the community because we know that one of the greatest stresses is the ethical distress because they can't treat animals, and they are either euthanising them because the owner can't afford something. Actually having that will have lots of flow-on benefits for the vets, for the animals and for the community.' [FOOTNOTE: Evidence, Ms Ann-Margaret Withers, Senior Manager, Outreach Programs, RSPCA NSW, 29 August 2023, p 51.]

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 7.55 be amended by inserting after 'concern':

'explaining that 'if you don't have access to a car or don't have access to someone to drive you to the vet, it's very difficult for people to get to their vet'. [FOOTNOTE: Evidence, Ms Alexandra Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, PetSure, 29 August 2024, p 66]. PetSure concluded that 'If pet access on public transport were possible, even partially, then pet parents (including those with service dogs) would have greater access to veterinary services, as well as food and essential supplies'. [FOOTNOTE: Submission 199, PetSure, p 8.]

Sentient agreed and gave evidence that:

We believe animals should definitely be allowed to travel on public transport across NSW, which has long been allowed in the UK, providing there are clear guidelines about safety for those animals and the public. This would assist owners without private transport getting to veterinary appointments and would also allow owners to go on holidays with their pets, take them to recreational areas and generally have the same community access as those who can afford private transport. Veterinary clinics are so overstretched that home visits are becoming less common.' [FOOTNOTE: Answers to questions on notice, Sentient, 28 September 2023, p 2.]

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That the following new paragraph be inserted after paragraph 7.68:

'The committee also heard evidence about the significant costs incurred by rescue and rehoming organisations in paying for veterinary fees for animals in their care. For example, Mrs Ellie Robertson gave evidence that 'small and large rescue groups struggle to access and pay for veterinary care, especially right now with the increasing number of homeless animals, especially cats, and kittens.' [FOOTNOTE: Submission 48, Mrs Ellie Robertson, p 2.]

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Mitchell: That Finding 15 be amended by inserting 'and large animals' after 'pets'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That paragraph 7.73 be amended by:

- a) omitting 'making it mandatory for this' and inserting instead 'providing'
- b) omitting 'to be provided'
- c) omitting 'first acquire and'
- d) omitting 'While there was no evidence put to the committee by breeders or pet shops, the committee believes these organisations have a responsibility to educate pet owners on the costs of pet ownership. The committee acknowledges that rescue organisations generally include owner education in their remit, however, this should also be mandatory for these organisations' and inserting instead 'The committee understands the NSW Pet Registry is still in the process of being upgraded. The committee believes the upgraded pet registry could be used as a way of disseminating this educational material to new pet owners'.
- e) omitting 'Additionally'
- f) omitting 'another' and inserting instead 'a primary'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst: That Recommendation 26 be amended by:

- a) omitting 'making it mandatory for the following organisations' and inserting instead 'using the NSW Pet Registry'
- b) omitting 'breeders, animal rescue organisations and pet shops' and 'local government authorities responsible for pet registration'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst:

- a) That paragraph 7.77 be amended by inserting after 'implement': 'if it was to be applied to all public vet access. However, the committee recognises that subsidised veterinary care for lower income earners, pensioners and animal rescue groups was supported broadly by stakeholders, and could be delivered through private veterinary practice.'
- b) That Recommendation 28 be moved to after paragraph 7.77.
- c) That the following new recommendation be inserted after Recommendation 28:

Recommendation X

The NSW Government investigate providing subsidised vet care to low-income earners, pensioners and animal rescue groups.

Ms Hurst moved: That paragraph 7.80 be omitted.

Question put and negatived.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Hurst:

- a) That the following new paragraph be inserted after paragraph 7.80:
- b) 'The committee notes evidence received that lack of animal-friendly public transport was a barrier to accessing veterinary care for some people. The committee therefore recommends that NSW Government consider options for trialling companion-animal friendly public transport.'
- c) That the following new committee comment be inserted after paragraph 7.81:

Recommendation X

That NSW Government consider options for trialling companion-animal friendly public transport.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Donnelly: That:

The draft report as amended be the report of the committee and that the committee present the report to the House;

The transcripts of evidence, tabled documents, submissions, correspondence, and answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions relating to the inquiry be tabled in the House with the report;

Upon tabling, all unpublished attachments to submissions be kept confidential by the committee;

Upon tabling, all unpublished transcripts of evidence, tabled documents, submissions, correspondence, and answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions related to the inquiry be published by the committee, except for those documents kept confidential by resolution of the committee;

The committee secretariat correct any typographical, grammatical and formatting errors prior to tabling;

The committee secretariat be authorised to update any committee comments where necessary to reflect changes to recommendations or new recommendations resolved by the committee;

Dissenting statements be provided to the secretariat within 24 hours after receipt of the draft minutes of the meeting;

The secretariat is tabling the report at 2.15 pm on Friday 28 June 2024;

The Chair to advise the secretariat and members if they intend to hold a press conference, and if so, the date and time.

6. Adjournment

The committee adjourned at 11.26 am until Thursday, 18 July 2024, 9.00 am, Macquarie Room, for a hearing of the 2023 inquiry into the operation of the approved charitable organisations under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*.

Sarah Newlands
Committee Clerk

