

Veterinary Social Work

Background

Retention of veterinarians and their teams is impacted by mental ill-health in the sector.

The mental health of veterinary teams is linked to the challenges of managing complex client interactions and situations.

These complex clients may include those experiencing vulnerabilities such as;

- homelessness or at risk of homelessness
- domestic and family violence
- advanced age
- physical disabilities
- mental health challenges
- neurodiversity
- financial disadvantage
- language and cultural barriers

When encountering clients in these circumstances, veterinary professionals and their teams often face challenging and sometimes overwhelming pressures to provide the optimal outcome for both their client and their patient. This can be due to the complex and deep attachment people have with the animals in their care, the pressure to deliver veterinary care with limited resources and cultural and situational factors when assisting those experiencing these vulnerabilities.

A major factor contributing to this can be that veterinary teams are not trained, experienced, or supported (emotionally or financially) to provide optimal care and service for complex client situations – which can result in poor wellbeing outcomes for all concerned – the animal, the client and the veterinary team.

What is Veterinary Social Work (VSW)?

Veterinary Social Work utilises qualified Social Workers who have undertaken further training to recognise and validate the role that the Human Animal Bond (HAB) plays in the lives of their clients.

Veterinary Social Work attends to the human needs at the intersection of veterinary and social work practice acting as the liaison between the people experiencing vulnerability, the social and financial resources they may have access to, and the veterinary team.

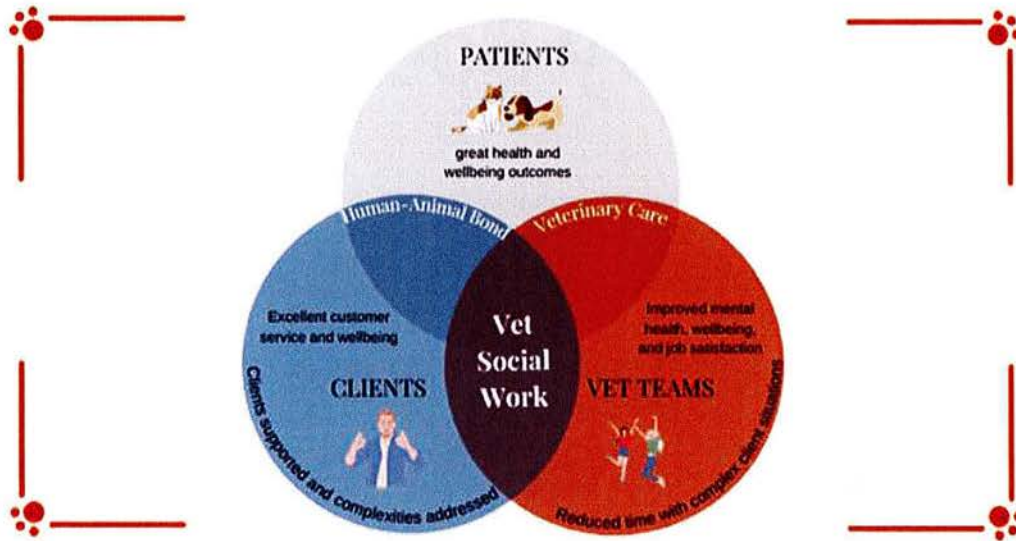
They also understand the unique challenges and stressors on those working in the veterinary field.

They are Social Workers who view situations through a human-animal bond and veterinary world lens and are the conduit between the people experiencing vulnerability, and the veterinary care their animals deserve. They reduce the stress, confusion, and barriers of the critical vet-client relationship and allow the veterinary team to focus on doing their job unobstructed. They provide time and space for clients and vet teams.

Veterinary professionals working collaboratively with allied human health professionals, such as Veterinary Social workers, deliver the best outcome for animal custodians, veterinary teams, and animals.

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Attending to the human needs at the intersection of veterinary and social work practice



Veterinary Social Work is an endorsed practice in the USA with tertiary level training available and graduates employed within veterinary settings. Opportunities to provide training and education in Australia are emerging with a high level of interest from both the veterinary and social work fields. The UT ([University of Tennessee](#)) and IAVSW ([International Association of Veterinary Social Work](#)) are supportive of the concept to be established worldwide appropriate to cultural and individual contexts (contextualised care model).

Currently, 35% of the Australian pet-owning population do not seek veterinary services for animals in their care because of fear of the financial impact, and not understanding there could be a range of options that suit their circumstances. The nett welfare deficit of this is immeasurable.

Research shows that people are healthier and happier with companion animals in their lives. This creates a conduit to exercise, social connections, and better mental health. The benefits of ensuring people experiencing vulnerability can keep the animals in their care healthy are many and varied.

The financial, social and welfare gain through providing a system where these people could safely access veterinary services for animals in their care would be substantial.

Some zoonotic issues can be partially managed through more comprehensive veterinary preventative health care. There is also evidence that, when shown the health benefits of say parasite control, some animal custodians are more willing to use this themselves.

Not only are animals taken care of, but the VSW interaction provides an opportunity to identify potential programs, resources or other supports that can be accessed by the client to assist them, as well as enhance the human animal bond.

Veterinary Social Work services are integral to attaining the benefits of One Health and One Welfare principles which help to create sustainable and resilient communities.

[AVA THRIVE](#) veterinary wellness platform tenets are *Protect, Prevent, Promote*. VSW embodies all three.

There is currently only one formally qualified Veterinary Social Worker in Australia, Ms Wendy Till, who is a co-founder of Veterinary and Community Care (VaCC), a charity advocating for veterinary social work. Wendy is contracted currently as a Social Worker in far north WA working with Indigenous communities. While not commonly available in Australia to date, in the future Veterinary Social Work services could be utilised by veterinary professionals and their teams to guide and support the provision of services to clients who may be experiencing barriers to appropriate veterinary care for their animals.

How does Veterinary Social Work fit with Contextualised Care

This contextualised care (in some instances it has also been referred to as spectrum of care) model of veterinary practice accounts for variations in a client's capacity or capability to pursue veterinary care options. The concept of contextualised care empowers the veterinary team to deliver the package of care that is appropriate for that "context", under the backdrop of limited resources.

This model for providing veterinary care includes:

- Collaborating with other disciplines to offer holistic support, including the utilisation of VSW services.
- Utilising communication strategies to understand a person's perspective, what may help the person rather than what we think may be best.
- Providing care that is best for a patient & their human/s.
- Providing care that is within the team's competence & business environment, accounting for ethics, societal pressures & the ecosystem in which we all live.
- Where decisions are made with clients, without judgement of them or ourselves.
- Where we don't feel we are letting ourselves down or the animals down, or our clients down if we don't conform to a particular level of service when another is more appropriate in an individual's situation.
- Meeting people and animals 'where they are' - respecting self - determination & unique circumstances.

The Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) [Day one competencies](#) have included the concept of a Contextualised Care model in veterinary practice. The competencies describe the knowledge, skills and abilities veterinarians must possess on "Day One" of their professional career to serve the interests of their patients and society, and to meet accreditation and the profession's requirements.

Teaching and support of the Contextualised Care model of veterinary practice, from undergraduate training by Veterinary Schools through to Veterinary Board acknowledgement, will be an essential element to this model of practice becoming widely practiced. Veterinary Boards could consider including communication and "guidelines" as to how this model of practice is viewed by Veterinary Boards, which will provide confidence for practitioners to utilise it.

Veterinary Social Work services and support will play a pivotal role in effective delivery of this model of veterinary care, at undergraduate training level and in every phase of a veterinarian's career.

What evidence is there that the concept of Veterinary Social Work services would work in Australia?

Veterinary Social Work is being implemented in a practice in Victoria. Dr Lissi Kennedy, of [Cherished Pets Community Veterinary Care](#) practice, is a pioneer of VSW in Australia and utilises Social Workers who have undergone training within her practice. She has been able to integrate VSW into her practice through grant funding by the Victorian government.

Objective evidence of the social impact of the work is being undertaken by [ROOY](#). Preliminary data indicates

- 19.21% of Cherished Pets' clients are recipients of CP VSW services
- Estimate that in mainstream practice an average of 5-10% of clientele would fall in to VSW category depending on the socioeconomic area

Through accessing services provided through interaction with a veterinary social worker, vulnerable members of the community have accessed

- 450 nights + respite care for crisis (FDV, mental health, hospitalisation, drugs and alcohol, other)
- 50+ crisis care packages in a 6month period
- 30+ recipients of CP home care assistance service

Other advantages of being the beneficiary of VSW and contextualised care include;

- 59% clients say they've accessed more services as a result of CP services
- 54% of clients get more exercise
- 98% say I'm a happier person because of my pet
- 71% say my pets have helped me develop better relationships with other people

The provision of VSW comes at a cost, in the private veterinary sector this cost is difficult to justify without support, given that the majority of benefit resides in public good delivered to the community, and indirect benefit to the veterinary team as discussed below. The work undertaken by Cherished Pets is made possible through grant funding of \$565,000 received in 2022 through the Victorian Department of Agriculture's Animal Welfare funding stream for a 12 month project to develop VSW training and provide VSW services.

This grant funding provides:

1. VSW Service Program

Salaries for:

- 1 FTE Program Manager – includes developing VSW training and managing delivery of VSW services
- 2 FTE VSW
- 0.4 FTE Volunteer coordinator

Provision of;

- Education
- Community Outreach Veterinary care including community veterinary nursing
- Emergency animal housing through 3rd party providers
- Consultation/advice to, and receive referral of eligible clients from, other veterinary practices – local and remote to CP

2. Flexible Pet Care Funding Packages

Hospital Social Workers, other external Health Service agencies and other Veterinary practices refer clients to CP for crisis care and support.

CP Crisis Care Packages pay for contextualised veterinary care incorporating VSW services and support to eligible clients who are:

- Requiring emergency hospital admission including MH admissions
- Experiencing DFV or Homelessness
- Entering Drug and Alcohol rehabilitation

For every package that is allocated funding for a CP crisis care package, CP receives another two enquiries that are provided VSW support services by CP outside of a crisis care package. These services are funded through the grant monies.

Who would use Veterinary Social Work services?

Clients come from a variety of backgrounds and may

- Have high treatment expectations
- Experience financial limitations, social complexities, mental health distress, disability or other vulnerabilities
- Have emotional responses which require support beyond the scope of veterinary expertise
- Display challenging behaviours – frustrated, angry, demanding, abusive, returning for no clinical reason, animal hoarding, etc

Veterinary Social Work can provide support to clients;

- Treatment decisions
- Euthanasia and grief & loss counselling/support groups
- Assessment tools & referral to human support services
- Education & follow-up
- Assessment, prioritisation and communication for clients in need of immediate support
- Support distressed animal families individually

How could Veterinary Social Work help the veterinary profession?

Veterinary Social Work services bring resources, tools, experience and education to veterinary teams that include;

- Communication skills
- Understanding the barriers for people to access veterinary care and their capacity or capability limitations to undertaking the recommended or required care
- Debriefing models
- Workplace boundaries
- Self compassion & Team compassion

Through provision of all of the aspects described above, VSW services can support veterinary teams through assisting with:

- De-escalation and difficult conversations with clients
- Taking on time-consuming (non technical) tasks with clients to free vets/nurses up to attend to aspects of their role that they are best equipped to perform
- Debriefing to process the day's events and reduce possible rumination once at home
- Facilitating healthy workplace boundaries, increased self-care strategies and a sustainable and mentally healthy work environment

This support is achieved through VSW services providing the time and space that is often not available in existing veterinary practice models.

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