

Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW



The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the peak national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Thirty percent of the AVA's membership reside and work in NSW and come from all fields within the veterinary profession.

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AVA Key Messages Addressing the Inquiry Terms of Reference

Below provides the key messages from the AVA's comprehensive submission to the inquiry

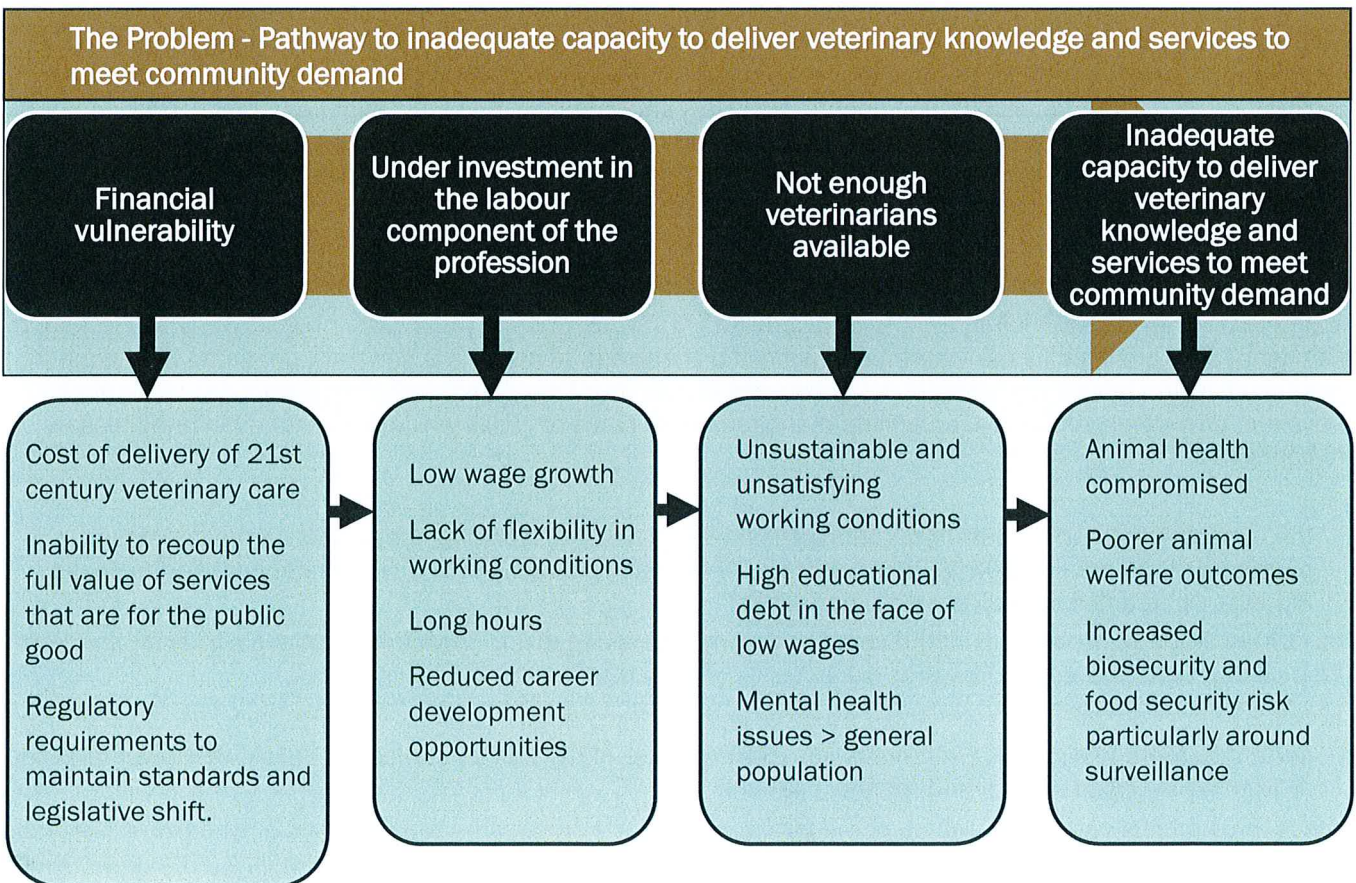
a) **the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry, and pathology**

The veterinary workforce shortage has now expanded into all sectors of the profession and for the last 7 years it has been formally recognised by the government. The drivers of inadequate capacity vary between differing sectors of the profession. In some instances, inadequate capacity may be due to long term decline in demand as is seen in livestock veterinary services. On the other hand, inadequate capacity in the companion animal sector (where there is a connection with an individual animal (emotional or high value) e.g., small animals, horses, peri-urban very small holding) is being driven by a rapid increase in demand due to increase in animal ownership and requirement for veterinary services. Due to the changing landscape of veterinary care, characterised by the increasing complexity of care, higher community expectations, and a lower tolerance for risk, there has been a decline in the quantity of veterinary services available to the community.

b) **the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates**

There are an ever-increasing number of challenges that are faced by the veterinary profession to maintain a sustainable veterinary workforce, and these can be broadly categorised into those;

1. driven by the private sector veterinary profession's financial vulnerability,
2. due to generational and societal change, and
3. due to limited funding for the public veterinary sector.



c) the burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession

The burn out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession are the result of a profession where the labour component has been chronically underfunded at a time of immense generational and social change. The profession as a whole is working hard in this area and the sole focus of protection has now moved to also encapsulate prevention and promotion of good workplace practices to improve these issues.

d) the role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses

Veterinary nurses are essential members of the veterinary team.

e) the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians

Migration has a role in helping address the shortage with immediate effect, allowing longer term solutions time to mature. Although there is a clear pathway for individuals without equivalent degrees to be able to work as a veterinarian in Australia, it takes a significant time and financial investment to complete this process.

f) the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services

The methods the profession has of managing after-hours veterinary services varies depending on the species and geography. The requirement to provide an afterhours service has a negative impact on working conditions and level of satisfaction for many veterinarians.

g) the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians

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. This is crucial to the maintenance of public confidence in the profession. Regular review and development of the legislation is needed to support modern veterinary practice, including who in the veterinary team is regulated, how breaches of restricted acts of veterinary sciences and complaints are managed, as well as management of unfunded obligations.

h) the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

The unintended consequence of industry optionally engaging with the veterinary profession, after a history of it being delivered as a funded public good, has meant that even aspects of veterinary service that producers require are no longer available. Rural veterinary practices are highly reliant on companion animal practice to maintain viability. The rural companion animal veterinary service provision model is not as attractive to veterinarians and veterinary team members as the urban companion animal veterinary service model, this combined with additional factors such as reduced access to vital community and support services (e.g. child care) has led to an overall reduction of rural veterinary businesses.

i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations

The cost of care provided by the veterinary practice for this group of animals is generally unable to be recouped. There is a lack of consistency between local councils of how they engage with veterinary practices to manage strays and provide expertise around animal management in times of crisis, which has resulted in unnecessary animal death.

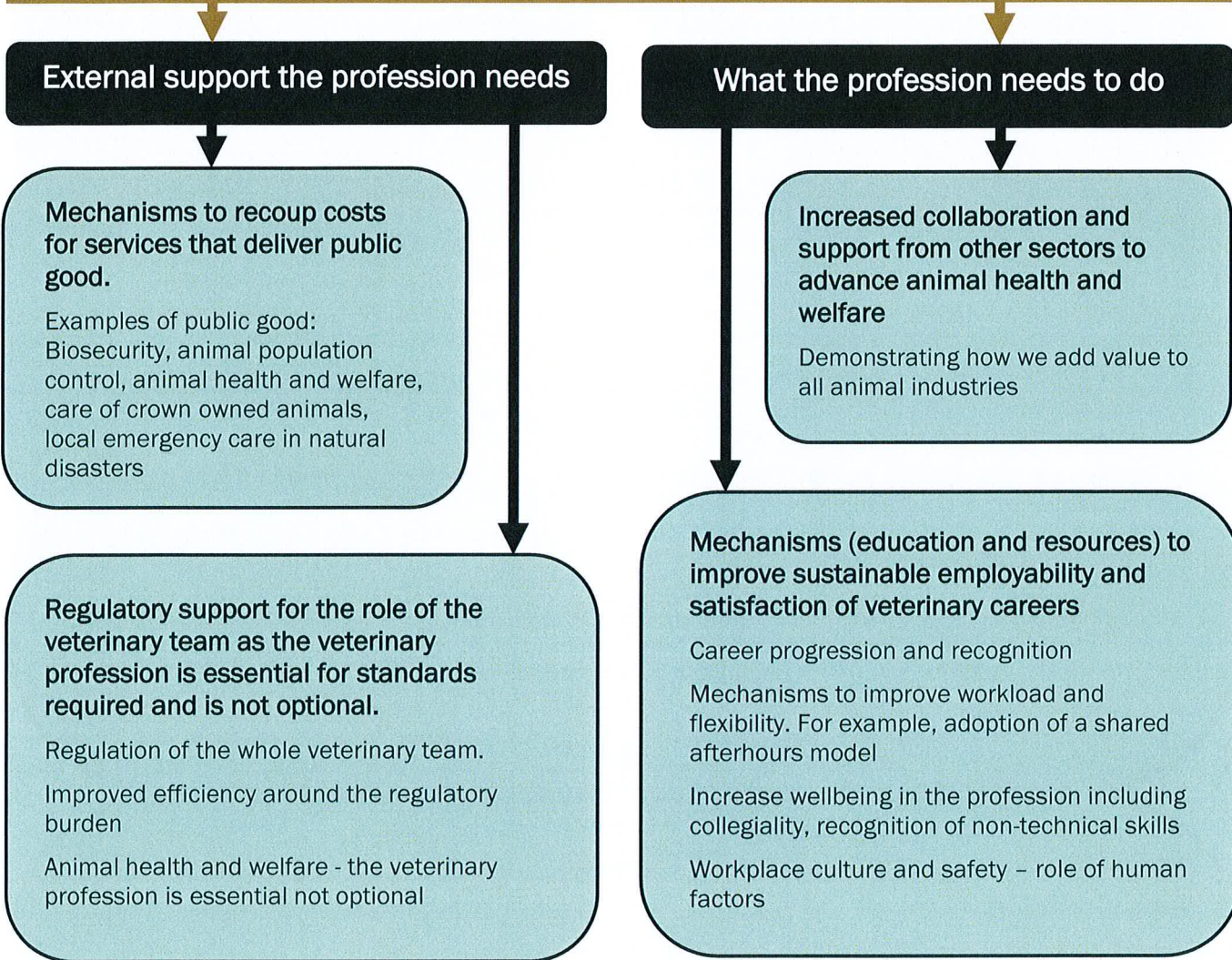
j) the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others

The current inadequate capacity of the veterinary workforce is negatively impacting all aspects of animal welfare and places animal related industries at risk in terms of both biosecurity and social licence.

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

Access to veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural, and remote locations, can be hindered by several barriers including affordability, inability of the profession to service people experiencing vulnerabilities, distance to travel and stigma or fear of judgement.

Intervention points to break the pathway to inadequate capacity to deliver veterinary knowledge and services to meet community demand



l) strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practicing veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

Some short-term stop gap strategies can be put into place to assist, while longer term strategies are required for sustained improvement. The long-term strategies to address the underlying causes and modify the structure of the profession to adapt to the changing needs of society are going to require careful thinking, and further data collection is required to produce strategies where the outcomes do not have unintended consequences and are not to the detriment of animal welfare, the community or the profession.

m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care

The AVA's top welfare objective is that any animal that is under human care in Australia should be able to access veterinary care, and strategies must address the barriers to veterinary care. Strategies to improve the sustainability of the profession through supporting the workforce will improve access to veterinary care.

AVA Recommendations to the Inquiry

To achieve long term outcomes

The AVA is calling upon the NSW Government to:

- provide funding to resource the development of prioritisation and planning of the longer-term strategies that will have the most effective outcomes for all stakeholders the veterinary profession serves and the profession itself.
- consider the pressing concerns experienced by government veterinarians and conduct a comprehensive review and develop a proactive strategy to support the critical work of our government veterinarians, ensure the health of our livestock, and maintain our ability to respond effectively to biosecurity threats and animal welfare issues.
- conduct legislative and regulatory reforms 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. This could be achieved by a review of the veterinary practice act and consider the interactions with other legislation including the prevention of cruelty to animals act.
- through funding encourage industry and the veterinary profession to collaborate and develop a framework or solution that will improve integration of veterinary services into animal production systems that is workable for all parties.
- explore solutions that support the veterinary sector in its role with stray animals, addressing the key issues outlined and promoting overall animal health, welfare, and public health.
- commit funding to develop and implement a framework that provides regulatory and appropriate financial support to the provision of veterinary services for lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations provided by all sectors of the profession (charities and the private veterinary sector).
- provide resources to fund a think tank to develop an afterhours model that is sustainable for the profession and allows veterinary services to be delivered to the NSW community in both urban and rural areas 24/7.

Short term strategies to allow time for development and implementation of long-term strategies

The AVA is calling upon the NSW Government to:

- commit to ongoing recognition and support of veterinarians to continue to build and maintain capacity for Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) surveillance and response activities.
- consider funding for the profession to provide Work Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities for individuals wishing to work in NSW as well as funding to assist NSW applicants undertake the examination process without financial hardship.
- considers funding around educational fee relief to encourage early career veterinarians to work in rural NSW.
- include veterinarians in existing mechanisms to sustain medical and paramedical workers in rural areas of NSW.
- provide veterinary professionals the same opportunities as other professions that are being encouraged to move to regional, rural and remote areas.
- commit funding to AVA's wellness initiative, THRIVE to support veterinarians and veterinary staff to lead satisfying, prosperous and healthy careers.
- consider funding a public awareness campaign to address the rising rates of verbal and physical assault of veterinary teams and to educate the community on the impact of their actions. For example, similar to the NSW Ambulance 'It's Never Okay' campaign.
- support changes to visa provisions including lifting of the age cap for permanent residency to be in line with the human medical field.
- support extending access to the national Translating and Interpreting Service for veterinarians.