

Veterinarians are frontline workers who play an essential role in our society, despite not being listed as essential workers in legislation. The veterinary profession is one of the most trusted occupations, rated as number 4 on the Governance Institute of Australia's Ethics Index 2022, following nurses, fire and ambulance services.

The work of veterinarians and veterinary nurses, their close colleagues, is glamourised by the television media. In reality, veterinarians do a lot of society's 'dirty work' such as in abattoirs, euthanasing animals and performing necropsies for animal cruelty cases. Day-to-day clinical practice is grinding. Vets and vet nurses are often poorly paid and tolerate unreasonable pressures - long shifts, being on-call, lack of support and ironically, abuse by the public.

A 2022 survey by Kookaburra Veterinary Employment found a quarter of veterinarians were planning to leave practice by 5 years. The AVA's study on veterinary wellness found 67% of veterinarians reported a mental health condition in the context of work-related factors. All this points to not just a workforce shortage, but a problem with the wellbeing of veterinary staff.

This situation has many causes, but the veterinary profession cannot be held responsible for all the solutions. This is a profession in crisis, and there is a grave risk that without government assistance, the burden on veterinarians will increase, and access to their services will continue to dwindle, particularly in rural and regional areas.

A key factor is the predominantly private funding of veterinary services, which is unsustainable. We have long recognised that proper medical care is a paramount obligation of government by a levy upon the taxpayer. We have also long recognised a paramount obligation to protect animal welfare. Yet, there is a glaring discrepancy between the *NSW Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*, which makes failure to provide an animal with necessary veterinary treatment an offence, and the financial barriers for many owners and producers in accessing veterinary care.

US research found that 80% of respondents cited financial constraints as the primary reason for not taking their animals to a veterinarian. It is unacceptable that the most financially challenged in our society should be deeply distressed by their inability to relieve the suffering of the animals they love, only to be offered euthanasia as a solution, also a known cause of compassion fatigue in veterinarians.

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The cost of veterinary care unaided by the equivalent of Medicare funding is also forbidding for veterinarians. Many practices are unable to recoup the full costs of delivering the quality of care demanded by animal owners and regulatory requirements. This is exacerbated by the expectation to perform pro bono treatment of injured wildlife and stray animals.

To address these issues, Sentient recommends that the government:

- establishes a taxpayer levy to fund free or subsidised veterinary care, or adopts solutions such as Victoria's proposed Veticare system and government-funded public veterinary hospitals;
- establishes and funds specialised wildlife clinics;
- increases funding of veterinary teaching hospitals; waives or reduces HECS fees for veterinary graduates; and fully subsidises the TAFE training of vet nurses.

