

NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the Veterinary Worker Shortage: post-hearing responses

Please note this is a joint response from Garry Putland, co-founder [Sophie's Legacy](#) and Caroline Winter, journalist/creator [Sick As A Dog podcast](#).

Questions on notice by The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:

- 1. Service NSW has significant resources and ongoing support for small businesses, including some intensive training. It has for a couple of decades now. I was wondering if you could come back to us about how appropriate you think they would be and whether people access those to provide support to take pressure off in the small business of running vet services.**

<https://www.service.nsw.gov.au/business>

One of the insights from Caroline Winter's Sick As A Dog podcast was that the vet industry is undervalued by both the government and the general community. We believe that a financial investment in the vet industry by the government would result in a far greater return on investment in the general well-being and mental health of all Australians.

One of the areas which is not well addressed in the veterinary industry is who is looking after the individuals who work in the industry? Whilst the AVA is the peak body representing the industry and predominantly the owners of the industry, we feel the AVA has a potential conflict of interest as it attempts to represent both owners and vets and staff who work for those owners. We know the industry is largely privately funded and that the vet union is not representing the individuals well. Additionally, the AVA is a member-based organisation and approximately one third of the veterinary industry are paid members. So who is looking after the other two thirds?

Our view is that there could be a specific section of the Services NSW that could be dedicated to supporting the individuals in the vet industry through the following:

- An ombudsman who can assist the individuals confidentially, in relation to their work conditions, contracts, unethical behaviour and other concerns that may be contributing to poor mental health. ie look after the individuals. The vet registration boards tend to look after the clients, and the standards, so they are not the appropriate body.
- Providing leadership skills for improving culture and practice in vet clinics. We would support a model where the individuals who are involved in these leadership training courses are involved in applying their learned skills in the current practice they are operating. The owners would need to be supportive of such an initiative.
- Providing services to vet clinics to improve their workplace culture and practice and bestow best-practice awards to clinics that demonstrates that staff are in a safe, supportive and positive workplace where they can flourish. We'd like to see this initiative going national and we suggest NSW could lead other states in such an endeavour.

- 2. The Australian Veterinary Association has given us their recommendations in submission 16. I am asking all witnesses to have a look at those and see if there are any you strongly support or any that you strongly disagree with. If you could let us know, please, that would be valuable.**

Responses address individually to the [Australian Veterinary Association Recommendations from submission 16](#)

Recommendation 1: The NSW Government commit to ongoing recognition and support of veterinarians to continue to build and maintain capacity for Emergency Animal Disease surveillance and response activities.

We agree that continuing to increase participation and capacity of government and private veterinarians to monitor and respond to Emergency Animal Disease outbreaks, like Foot and Mouth Disease, for example, are vital. The shortages are already putting pressure on services, and vets being on properties, looking for biosecurity risks in their day to day, so any program that will assist in building this surveillance is welcome.

Recommendation 2: The NSW Government 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.

With a critical shortage of private vets in regional/rural NSW, putting additional pressure on government vets to fill the void (which falls outside of their remit which is diagnostic, not treatment based), we agree that a review would be prudent to assess the challenges they face in doing their jobs, and what strategies are required to support them to ensure they can carry out their role in assessing livestock and responding to potential biosecurity risks.

The vet shortage in biosecurity and in small animals are intrinsically linked.

The AVA submission admits that the vet shortage has been ongoing for many years, in fact decades. What needs to be done here is to understand where the supply of vets can be increased, or retention is improved. It's almost unfathomable that after decades, the industry body is still requiring a committee to develop a proactive strategy.

Through Sophie's Legacy's survey we got insights into why vets and vet nurses leave the industry in small animal practices: Poor pay, long hours, having to cover shifts to keep practices open, unreasonable demands and client abuse and general dissatisfaction of their experiences in clinics.

In fact, the AVA says the business model for the small animal vet practices is not working. So a great way to start is to look at how vet practices can focus on the 'humans' first - that is, the staff - and then build a business model that works for the individuals so the humans are not collateral. This may increase the costs to the community for the vet industry to provide high-quality health services to pets.

Recommendation 3: The NSW Government commit funding to AVA's wellness initiative, [THRIVE](#) to support veterinarians and veterinary staff to lead satisfying, prosperous and healthy careers.

No comment.

Recommendation 4: The NSW Government 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.

Sophie's Legacy may be a small, volunteer-led team but it has already undertaken a public awareness campaign with great success. The "We're Only Human" campaign saw massive

nation-wide media coverage and posters distributed to Australia's 4,100 veterinary clinics, and a significant raising of awareness of the shocking suicide rate in the vet industry.

Feedback from vets and staff on the frontline say the campaign is making a big difference as the public realises the massive physical and mental-health pressures vets and staff face every day.

The We're Only Human campaign was formulated with the organisation which produced the award-winning South Australian ambulance campaign "I can't fight for your mate's life if I'm fighting for mine." Sophie's Legacy has financed this campaign with public donations and a small grant from the SA Government. The work has been done - and we are happy to share our messaging.

We strongly agree that there should be NSW Government funding towards a public awareness campaign to help educate the community about the high rates of abuse and assault on veterinary staff. We see there is a role for all state and territory governments, as well as the federal government in this space. The Sick As A Dog Podcast has been very well received by the veterinary and broader community, showing there is a need for this kind of education and a distinct lack of understanding around the issues that face the industry and its people.

So, while Sick As A Dog and Sophie's Legacy have had significant success in raising the awareness of the vet suicide crisis and has incredible support from the vet community and increasingly from the general community, it is true that more needs to be done.

We would like to invite the NSW Government to consider contributing funding to Sophie's Legacy, as the South Australian Government has done, to continue the work it has started in May 2023 with the 'We're Only Human' campaign and to assist with the follow-up 'LOST' campaign, which is in the planning stages. This campaign is successful because it resonated with frontline workers and the public. It has gained much traction in vet clinics nationally and internationally, across social media, traditional media and into the broader community.

However, the education campaign should not stop there. We also strongly believe there needs to be far reaching and broad ranging community messaging around the intrinsic value the veterinary industry plays for all Australians and for all Australia's pets, wildlife, horses, and livestock. With most of the veterinary sector within the private market, there is a financial imperative for these businesses – but in running that business, they balance trying to pay their staff appropriately, not charge their clients too much, provide high quality care and continue to meet the growing expectations of the community. This all comes at a cost, and currently that is at the cost of mental health and lives.

As mentioned by Caroline Winter during the hearing, there is a dire need for funding to support research work to measure the suicide rate among vet professionals to assist benchmarking any changes over the coming years against timely, relevant statistics. Currently the [widely relied upon suicide rate data](#) (four times the rate of the Australian population) is 15 years old and this desperately needs updating. Caroline Winter has started having conversations with researchers about how a project like this might be done but will need funding to make that happen.

Fundamentally, the veterinary profession is a private sector full of people doing a whole lot of public good, and for some of the time, they provide services for free. It is something vets have been doing for decades, but it is not sustainable any longer. Vets are under supported, under resourced, and under financed. For any government assistance or funding across any other projects, there needs to be an education and communications piece to support that undertaking.

Recommendation 5: The NSW Government consider funding for the profession to provide work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for overseas veterinarians wishing to work in NSW as well as funding to assist international NSW applicants undertake the Australian veterinary examination process without financial hardship.

We agree that some financial assistance that could help attract overseas veterinarians to work in NSW and fill some of the workforce shortage would be beneficial. However, we also ask that the inquiry make recommendations about how to address the factors that affect the supply of vets and vet nurses in the industry. Adding to the population of vets is commendable but this must not be a bandaid measure - it is important to dig deep and work out why vets are leaving, because those who join the Australian industry from overseas will face the same issues as local vets.

We do not know what impact the above recommendation might make on the overall supply. While looking at ways to quickly address the supply or haemorrhaging issues that contribute to the workforce shortage, there is also a desperate need to improve the conditions for current workers as an immediate and effective way to reduce the low retention rate?

Recommendation 6: The NSW Government support changes to visa provisions including lifting of the age cap for permanent residency to be in line with the human medical field.

No comment.

Recommendation 7: The NSW Government 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.

While we believe research and consideration around a sustainable after-hours model would be a worthwhile endeavour, we disagree that this should be funded by the NSW Government, but rather taken up by the AVA itself.

We would also like to add that addressing this issue in isolation of the general business model for the small animal vet practices would partially solve some of the issues. It's our understanding that many day practices refer cases to after-hours clinics which seems to be the model that is already developing in the industry.

We believe that there is not likely to be a one size fits all business model for city and rural clinics. We know that the problem is exacerbated in the rural clinics and so other models might work better where staff are not so prevalent.

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.

We strongly agree that veterinary professionals should be given the same incentives to move to regional, rural and remote areas as other 'like' professions including GPs and nurses. This may include state-based incentive schemes around rent assistance, travel subsidies, rural loadings and after-hours inducements, or longer-term assistance if vets stay in the regions for a certain period.

Additionally, there could be a more formalised program established that would streamline

graduates into regional and rural areas with support and ongoing training. In many professions, the first 5 years is crucial in helping to retain staff. In rural areas, support programs for those who choose to go to rural practices and in some cases are the only vet in a location/clinic, would provide much needed emotional and psychological support.

Recommendation 9: The AVA calls upon the NSW Government to 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.

No Comment.

Recommendation 10: The NSW Government commits 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).

We strongly agree that the current model of expecting vet practices to look after the health of stray animals and wildlife at no cost should be changed, and additionally, that veterinary staff responding during emergency situations should be financially compensated/better resourced.

These increased expectations are carried out for free or at a very reduced cost. The initial consultation and testing for injured or sick strays or wildlife can cost up to \$500 - that's before any further diagnostic testing or treatment is carried out. This time and cost are borne by the veterinarian or the clinic. The stress of these extra animals to treat add to the failing business model that puts both the vet owner and their staff under additional pressure, which contributes to the poor mental health of the sector.

We note that \$6 million in funding by the NSW Government was promised and recently revoked for The Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital (BBWH). This charity is an excellent example of one that helps take the pressure off the many vet clinics and vet staff, as noted above, having treated more than 4000 native animals since opening at no cost to the government, run solely through donations.

As was highlighted in the Sick As A Dog podcast, the BBWH is one organisation doing the work of government, in looking after the animals the Crown legally owns - animals Australia relies on for nature and tourism, and that sit on the Commonwealth Coat of Arms. Treating these animals is a specialist area and requires specialist knowledge and skills.

Recommendation 11: The NSW Government through funding encourages 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.

We are not sure how this would contribute to addressing the workforce shortage and the causes of these shortages, for example, client abuse, burnout, under-resourcing, and unattainable treatment targets.

Recommendation 12: The NSW Government support extending access to the national Translating and Interpreting Service for veterinarians.

While a worthy recommendation, we are not sure how this would contribute to addressing the workforce shortage.

Recommendation 13: The NSW Government provide funding to resource the development of prioritisation and planning of the longer-term strategies that will have the most effective workforce outcomes for all stakeholders the veterinary profession serves and the profession itself.

We are supportive of the funding measure, but the fact that the industry has known about the workforce shortage and the high suicide rate for so long now, it seems incredible that they are asking for the prioritisation and planning of the longer-term strategies which we believe should be known and articulated well before now.

We are keen to make sure these strategies flow down to the individuals and don't fund activities that merely keep the industry machine functioning as it is. The priorities at this time need to be addressing the issues that affect the individuals and may require new representation that directly impacts the individuals.

Recommendation 14: 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. 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.

We strongly agree the NSW Veterinary Practices Act 2003 needs reviewing and reforming to ensure the legislative and regulatory framework ensures a safe, supportive, and flexible work environment for vet professionals now and into the future.

Among the many areas that should be considered, we also strongly agree to changing who can be registered under the Veterinary Practitioners Board. Vet nurses are an underutilised resource within vet practices, and a review of the framework to include the registration of nurses and para-veterinary staff under the Veterinary Practitioners Board, would allow professional standards to be set for these groups, and assist veterinarians in clinic to reduce their workload, and as a result, the stress and burnout experienced. This would need to be backed by better pay for nurses, who currently are paid at the same rate as a retail worker or fast-food operator.

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

We strongly agree the NSW Government plays a role in, or pushing federally for, a HECS/Debt forgiveness scheme as is afforded to graduate doctors providing vet professionals with assistance to reduce their HECS debt in exchange for them moving to regional areas to ease the pressure where the shortages are critical, and mental health concerns are high.

Recommendation 16: The NSW Government includes veterinarians in existing mechanisms

to sustain medical and paramedical workers in rural areas of NSW.

We are not sure how this recommendation addresses the vet workforce shortage.

However, in the AVA paper it does mention the work of other professionals in the vet industry and whether there could be a review of the roles/tasks that could be done by perhaps vet nurses. We have spoken to many who say that vet nurses are underutilised in vet practices, and this is largely due to regulation about the roles they can play. By increasing the role/responsibility of the vet nurses this could reduce the pressures on vets, and in turn it could raise the profile, pay and respect for nurses in the industry. This in turn could improve the retention of both vet nurses and vets. A win/win. Sophie Putland always had high praise for the role of nurses in supporting vets and we are sure she would say they were under-recognised for the work they do and could be doing.

Comment from Garry Putland, co-founder of Sophie's Legacy:

I am perplexed by the AVA and its requests for funding to investigate issues that have been well known for a significant amount of time, and available within their organisation's range of knowledge just by reaching out to their members and drawing on their collective experiences. The statistics of veterinarian suicide are damning and worrying, but they are significantly out of date as well, having been compiled in 2008. I have no doubt these statistics are worse now. The issues facing vets have been clear for almost two decades and what has been done? I believe the AVA is struggling to find solutions after turning their attention to the problems relatively recently. The vacuum resulting from a lack of action has resulted in more vets leaving the industry and others pushed so far, they have taken their own life. If funding is directed to the AVA then it would be pertinent to ensure there is accountability in achieving the agreed deliverables which should be focussed on solving the chronic workforce issues in the industry.

Thank you again for the chance to appear at this vital Parliamentary Inquiry, and respond to these questions.

Kind regards,

Caroline Winter, Journalist/Creator Sick As A Dog & Garry Putland, Co-founder Sophie's Legacy.