



The veterinary voice in animal welfare

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO.4 – REGIONAL NSW INQUIRY INTO THE VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Supplementary questions: Sentient, The Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics

1. You argue in your submission that Veticare should ideally be a Federal scheme. Do you still think there would be value in the NSW State Government in providing support to low-income earners and other disadvantaged groups to access vet care?

A Federal scheme is obviously the ideal as this would be funded by a small levy on the taxpayer, providing benefits for animal welfare and human wellbeing. Australia is a nation of pet owners, and we know that companion animals have a positive impact on the lives of others beyond their immediate family. A Federal scheme is beyond the scope of this inquiry, however, and may never eventuate. For this reason, we would definitely support a NSW State Government scheme akin to the proposed Veticare in Victoria. There are so many owners who are financially disadvantaged and unable to pay for veterinary treatment, which is heartbreaking, may have a detrimental impact on their mental health and causes moral distress to veterinarians who deal with these stalemate situations daily. Groups of owners who are particularly disadvantaged include those who are homeless or at risk of being homeless, living in refuges following domestic violence, frail and aged or living with serious health issues or disabilities, including mental health issues. We cannot expect charities to meet this need and at best, they are usually only able to offer free vaccinations, desexing and health checks. Sentient supports any state-based scheme that would allow access to bulk billed veterinary care in public veterinary clinics (to be established in regional and urban areas), where wildlife carers could also bring sick or injured native species for treatment. This system could perhaps 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. We believe such a scheme would be welcomed by veterinarians and would support their retention in the profession.

2. There was some discussion at the inquiry that members of the public should be required, or encouraged, to obtain pet insurance. What are some of the limitations of pet insurance? Would it resolve the issue of vets providing pro-bono care to homeless companion animals or wildlife?

Only a minority of pet owners in Australia has pet insurance and the percentage has dropped since 2019 due to cost and perceived lack of value. In 2022, 17% of households with dogs and 12% with cats had pet insurance.¹ There are numerous pet insurance products available, and these have been promoted by the veterinary profession, but such policies are more suited to pet owners in mid to high socioeconomic groups. Apart from the cost of pet insurance, which increases each year of a pet's life, often with corresponding reductions in coverage, there are other limitations.² Some breeds are much more expensive to insure, most policies fail to cover pets for chronic, pre-existing conditions and there are annual sub limits for certain items. Particular specialities in

¹ Animal Medicines Australia (2022) Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people AMAU008-Pet-Ownership22-Report_v1.6_WEB.pdf (animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au)

² [Pros and cons of pet insurance | CHOICE](#)

veterinary medicine are generally not covered, such as behavioural medicine. We do not see pet insurance as the answer to the lack of affordability of veterinary treatment and any suggestion of making pet insurance mandatory for pet owners would be elitist and unfair. This would also not resolve the issue of vets providing pro-bono care to homeless companion animals or wildlife, as these animals are not owned at the time of rescue and in any case, it would be unreasonable to expect volunteer organisations such as wildlife rescue groups to pay for pet insurance.

3. Some witnesses have argued that the restrictions on animals travelling on public transport in NSW are an additional barrier to people being able to access veterinary services. Do you agree this is a barrier, and would you like to see reform to allow animals on public transport across NSW?

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. There has been a recent expansion in mobile veterinary services, but these are run on a private practice model, so whilst low income and other disadvantaged pet owners would not have to travel, they still need to pay the upfront veterinary fees.

4. You note in your submission that the veterinary workforce shortage is having “detrimental impacts on the welfare of animals in shelters and pounds” – can you talk a bit about what these impacts are, and what you think needs to be done to ensure better access to vet care in pounds?

The increased pressure on shelter veterinarians posed by the veterinary workforce shortage can lead to delays in treatment and also to clinical errors. All of this can prolong the stay of animals in shelters, increasing their risk of contracting infectious diseases and developing behavioural problems, all of which reduce their chances of being rehomed. Shelters are experiencing the same difficulty in recruitment as private veterinary clinics, and this is possibly worse due to the lower pay rates they offer vets and the stressful and confronting nature of shelter work. This is why the majority of vets working in shelters are generally recent graduates. We believe this situation means animals are not getting the best standard of care, such as female dogs who are not spayed completely due to the pressure on recent graduates to perform several surgeries a day under time pressure; it can be difficult to locate both ovaries and we know of owners who have adopted female dogs who then went into season, so needed the surgery to be redone by private vets. We are also aware of a situation (in a shelter in another state) where a junior vet who was consulting advised that a cat needed to have both eyes removed due to the difficulty the nurses were having administering medication and a view that the cat’s condition was incurable. Luckily the senior vet who had been given the surgery questioned this, consulted an eye specialist and successfully treated this cat, who was later rehomed, which would have been more difficult had she been completely blind. Another concern is that euthanasia rates may be higher, such as for young kittens who may be considered difficult to rehome due to low body weight or other animals who require significant care before being rehomed.

We suggest that better access to vet care in shelters will be achieved by higher pay rates and better working conditions, which should attract more experienced veterinarians, along with a formal mentor system to train new graduates and less experienced vets. The state government gives very little funding to animal shelters run by charities, and this should be rectified as they are doing essential work under very challenging circumstances, often at great personal cost.

5. Do you think that funding for desexing programs is part of the solution to the crisis we have on our hands, to reduce the number of accidental litters currently burdening the system?

Funding for desexing programs is essential to reduce the number of unwanted puppies and kittens who need rehoming. It also ensures that people without the money to pay for desexing can access this service. This could definitely assist with reducing the crisis in the veterinary workforce shortage in certain areas, but on its own would be insufficient as more systemic changes are needed, such as government assistance to fund all veterinary services, at least for those who are financially disadvantaged.

6. You note in your submission that, under the current legislative framework, the Veterinary Practitioners Board can only address complaints through a disciplinary procedure, with a “focus on the individual veterinarian” rather than the broader vet practice processes and cultures. Do you think we need to be reviewing the way complaints are handled in NSW, to ensure positive outcomes from genuine complaints?

We agree that the complaints process in NSW needs to be reviewed. Currently, vets live with the fear of a vexatious complaint, which 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. Also, complaints where a vet provided inadequate or even dangerous treatment can only protect future animals by addressing the work culture, not just the individual vet's need for further professional development. We believe there should be a review of veterinary practice legislation to allow the Veterinary Practitioners Board to address complaints systemically, and to move beyond a merely disciplinary focus. Without addressing practice processes and culture, these will remain as underlying causes of further complaints. The profession also needs a mandatory system of mentorship to retain veterinarians and ensure they are supported to gradually take on more challenging cases and are able to work to best practice standards. A hit and miss approach, or 'faking it till you make it', is not good for animal welfare or client relations.

7. There was a suggestion made at the Inquiry that the veterinary profession should fund and facilitate child-care for veterinarians, in order to make it easier for veterinarians with children to work. Is this something you believe that individual veterinary practices, or the profession at large, would be financially or practically able to provide? If not, could such a program be funded by Government and would that benefit the veterinary industry?

It is unlikely that individual veterinary practices or the profession at large could or should be expected to fund this. Without government funding, which we note is not provided to most other

professions, we suggest that veterinary practices adapt to the changing nature of the workforce by designing practice models that support parents. This could consist of flexible working arrangements such as part time work or shorter daily shifts with time set aside for clinical handover of cases. Without a focus on a healthy work-life balance, the attrition rate of veterinarians in practice will continue to escalate.

8. There can sometimes be restrictions on the ability of veterinarians to report animal cruelty due to confidentiality and privacy obligations. Is this something we should be looking fix as part of any review of the Veterinary Practice Act – and do we need indemnity or legal protection for vets reporting cruelty

This is no longer an issue for veterinarians. An update to the Veterinary Practitioners Code of Professional Conduct (cl 12) now provides that a veterinarian is able to disclose confidential information to an officer under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* or an approved charity within the meaning of the Act when it relates to an alleged offence under that Act or an alleged offence relating to animal cruelty under *the Crimes Act 1900*.

We believe the main issue that prevents veterinarians from reporting suspicions of animal cruelty is the lack of support and procedures to do so within a private practice model. Practice owners may be concerned about clients not returning with their animals, who will therefore not receive treatment. Sentient advocates further discussion within the profession about how to support veterinarians to report suspected abuse. This support should include continuing professional development, practice protocols and seriously addressing the issue of veterinarians as mandatory reporters, with a change to veterinary practice legislation. It is not uncommon for owners to present their cats or dogs for euthanasia, citing ‘accidents’ that are inconsistent with the injuries observed. Another common scenario is missing dogs brought in by the public who recoil with fear when their owner comes to collect them. These are sources of moral distress for veterinarians in the absence of firm guidance from their profession. The link between animal abuse and domestic and family violence has been clearly established, so it would also be in the public interest for vets to make reports to the appropriate authorities regarding their suspicions.

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28/9/2023