



Australian Veterinary Association
New South Wales Division
2023 NSW State Election Platform

Veterinarians are an integral part of the fabric of our community. They manage the health and welfare of our livestock that are crucial to our international trade and to the safety and security of our food, and they work in our public health sector on managing disease risks to animals and people alike. They care for the companion animals that are increasingly part of our families.

The work of veterinary professionals impacts the daily lives of all Australians and their animals in a multitude of ways. The expertise and contribution veterinarians make to the community is highly valued, essential for the health of companion animals and significantly contributes to the social license under which our animal industries operate.

Unfortunately, the sustainability of the veterinary profession is at risk due to decades of underinvestment. Continued underinvestment in the veterinary profession will result in:

- Increased difficulty accessing veterinary diagnostic expertise and care (particularly in regional and remote areas);
- Greater delays in disease detection in production animal species;
- Impaired emergency animal disease response (e.g. Foot and Mouth Disease, Lumpy Skin Disease, African Swine Fever)
- Impaired response to zoonotic diseases (e.g. Japanese encephalitis virus, Hendra virus)

For the security of animal industries and the wellbeing of people who depend on animals, it is crucial that the role of veterinarians in animal health and welfare and biosecurity is maintained. To do this, two things are needed:

- Support from regulators and the community to ensure that veterinary expertise and advice is integral to every level of decision making around biosecurity and the health and welfare of animals;
- Increased investment in 'public good' services to ensure that these vital services can be sustainably provided by the veterinary profession.

Furthermore, to support the long-term sustainability of the veterinary profession and provision of veterinary services it is critical to address the mental health crisis currently impacting veterinarians and its influencing factors (workforce retention, financial stress, working conditions, and client relations).

In recognition of the role for government in this, ahead of this NSW State Election, the AVA is calling on the next State Government to support and/or address the following key areas:

- Biosecurity and One Health
- Animal welfare legislation
- Stray dogs and cats
- Rural and regional workforce
- Veterinary profession at greater risk of poor mental health



[About the Australian Veterinary Association \(AVA\)](#)

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. The AVA consists of over 7300 members of which 30% of the membership reside and work in NSW who come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, aquatic animals, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health, food safety and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical research and development and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. The Association also has strong membership amongst our future veterinarians who are currently training in Australia's veterinary schools.

Biosecurity and One Health

Globally with the COVID-19 pandemic, and locally with the Japanese Encephalitis (JE) outbreaks the need for One Health approaches to disease management has been brought into sharp focus. Over 60 percent of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, including SARS-CoV-2, resulting from disease spill-over from animals. Approximately 71% of zoonoses originate from wildlife. Whether in regard to human diseases with animal origins or diseases that regularly cross back and forth between humans and animal hosts, a wholistic and integrated approach to disease control is essential for the health and wellbeing of animals and the humans who depend on them. As leaders in animal health and welfare, veterinarians play a crucial role in this. The AVA is strongly supportive of the Federal Government's initiative to establish a National Centre for Disease Control (CDC); however, a commitment needs to be made for the inclusion of veterinarians in the development and ongoing operations of this new body. In December 2022, the AVA released its [policy: Australian National Centres for Disease Control](#).

The AVA and Australian veterinarians in general are very active in Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) preparedness and response. With Lumpy Skin Disease (LSD), African Swine Fever (ASF) and Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) on our doorstep, there is an ever-present threat to our agricultural sector and economy. Our freedom from these diseases is critical for the welfare of Australian livestock and underpins current trade agreements. An incursion of either disease will have disastrous implications for our international and domestic markets, and the welfare of animals within Australia. Veterinarians are a key part of surveillance and, where required, response. The involvement of veterinarians has been central in the eradication of Equine Influenza, for example.

In [2009 regional veterinary laboratories were closed](#) and services centralised at the [NSW Animal and Plant Health Laboratories](#) (APHL). APHL provides veterinary laboratory testing to support diagnostic, surveillance, and emergency response investigations for EAD in NSW. Through NSW Local Land Services (LLS) network, veterinarians are provided animal health information and access to APHL services. LLS are currently reviewing the courier services and arrangements for veterinary samples sent to APHL to ensure efficient access and diagnosis.

Currently the NSW Department of Primary Industries through the Vet Engagement Project is working with the AVA and the veterinary sector to improve and increase engagement of government and private veterinarians for EAD preparedness and response. The AVA is greatly supportive of the project and its vital purpose of identifying the important roles of veterinarians in EAD surveillance and outbreak response activities and to increase veterinary capacity to monitor and response to EAD incursions. This project is due to end in mid-2023.

Recommendations

- That the NSW Government support the inclusion of veterinarians in the development and operations of the new national Centre for Disease Control.



- The NSW Government commit to ongoing funding of Government veterinary diagnostic laboratory services.
- The NSW Government commit to ongoing recognition and support of veterinarians to build and maintain capacity for EAD surveillance and response activities.

Animal welfare legislation

The NSW *Prevention of Cruelty to Animal Act 1979* is over 40 years old and while there have been significant updates, the present Act does not address recent advancements in animal welfare science that recognise animal sentience and acknowledge the need not just to prevent poor welfare, but to promote positive animal welfare¹. The AVA welcomes the Government and the Parliament looking at this and supports the development of a new and modern Act that more accurately reflects current animal welfare science and societal expectations regarding the welfare of animals. The AVA has made a detailed submission to the review² and encourages the next Government and Parliament to progress this further.

NSW has a series of Codes of Practice with regard to the treatment of animals. Some are mandatory and others may be used in defence against allegations of animal cruelty. These Codes underpin much of what is achieved by animal welfare legislation. It is important that they are comprehensive in their coverage, updated regularly to reflect advances in animal welfare science and evolving community expectations, and are enforceable. The AVA recommends several Codes are prioritised for updating and several new ones established, including:

- updating the animal welfare code of practice for breeding dogs and cats, the code of practice for animals used in rodeo events, and
- developing codes of practice for the breeding of animals with heritable defects, and rehoming animals from shelters and pounds.

One of the areas where a new code is required is in breeding animals with heritable defects. For example, in recent years there has been a rise in the popularity of brachycephalic (“flat-faced”) dog breeds such as Pugs, French Bulldogs and Boston Terriers. Unfortunately, these exaggerated features can lead to lifelong health and welfare compromise. An enforceable code of practice could ensure that breeding animals are screened for genetic defects, and that animals with extreme conformation are not used for breeding.

NSW shelters and pounds vary greatly in their facilities and operations. Animals kept in pounds and shelters must be housed under appropriate conditions that ensure their health and welfare, meeting the animals’ physiological, behavioural, and social needs. All animals must be cared for humanely but only animals with suitable health and behaviour should be re-homed. The AVA calls upon the NSW Government to introduce uniformity in the management and legislative controls that govern animal shelters and council pounds through the development of a new code of practice. The AVA policy [Animal shelters and municipal pounds](#) provides guidance for the design and operation of these facilities.

Entertainment and recreation including animals is popular in NSW. Up to date legislation is critical in ensuring the health and welfare of animals used for these purposes and ensure their ongoing social license. The Code of Practice for animals used in rodeo events has not been updated in 35 years and it

¹ [The 2020 Five Domains Model: Including Human–Animal Interactions in Assessments of Animal Welfare](#)

² <https://www.ava.com.au/member-updates/submissions/nsw-animal-welfare-inquiry-submission/>



would be prudent to complete a review of the code in light of modern animal welfare science. For example, calf roping has been found to cause distress in calves used in these events³.

Recommendations

- That the NSW Government and Parliament progress the development of a new Animal Welfare Act
- That the NSW government develop and introduce codes of practice for:
 - Breeding animals with heritable defects
 - Animals in shelters and pounds
- That the NSW prioritise the updating of the:
 - Animal Welfare Code of Practice - Breeding dogs and cats
 - NSW Code of Practice - Animals used in rodeo events

Stray dogs and cats

Veterinary practices are often presented with dogs and cats found by concerned community members for reuniting the animal with its owner rather than taking the animal directly to a council ranger or pound. This can be due to a reluctance by the community member to impound the animal or because council facilities can have limited opening hours and access whereas veterinary practices are often open out-of-hours on weekends and weekdays.

Veterinarians are authorised under the *Companion Animal Act* to access owner information from implanted identification microchips. If the owner cannot be identified, then legally the animal is required to be surrendered by the veterinarian to a council pound. This must occur within 72 hours after receipt of the animal.

Not all veterinary practices can admit a stray animal for holding or can only hold for a few hours. This can be due to restrictions on animal holding areas with the clinic, council prohibition on overnight housing of animals due to area noise restrictions and not having an authorised premises status under the *Companion Animal Act*.

A multitude of issues can arise for veterinary practices receiving stray animals which are associated with holding strays for council collection, treating injured strays, and problems identifying owners.

These issues are clearly demonstrated in the results from [the September 2022 AVA survey: stray and veterinary practices engagement with NSW councils/pounds](#). The survey results showed:

- 96% of respondents advised they receive stray dogs and cats at their veterinary practices;
- 81% advised they don't receive payment for looking after strays;
- 92% advised that if payment was received, it did not cover the practices full costs for housing and treating strays.

Respondents to the survey raised the following key issues that urgently needs addressing:

- Few veterinary practices have a financial arrangement with their local council for the holding of stray animals. Most private veterinary businesses are carrying the financial burden for housing and treating stray dogs and cats before they are collected by council.

³ [Behaviours expressed by rodeo calves during different phases of roping](#)



- Councils may take longer than 72 hours to collect strays from veterinary practices, placing the veterinary practice in breach of section 63A of the *Companion Animals Act 1998*.
- Some councils are refusing to collect strays (especially stray cats) and deflecting the responsibility and cost onto veterinarians and veterinary practices. This problem is compounded by some councils directing members of the public to take strays to veterinary practices rather than to council owned facilities. Furthermore, several councils have told practices that once an animal is presented to the clinic they become their responsibility, including treating the animal for free.
- Many veterinary practices have reported issues of being unable to contact council after hours, on weekends, public holidays, or during the Christmas/New year break. This results in the practice having to house, feed and maintain the animal until the council can be contacted. Facilities intended for the veterinary practice's animal clients are not available until vacated by the stray animal.
- Some council staff have instructed veterinary practices and the public to release the stray back onto the streets which endangers the animal and risks human health. This request is contrary to the welfare of the animal and could be considered abandonment under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*. In addition, releasing strays back onto the streets goes against veterinarians' good conscience and is in contradiction of the NSW Veterinary Oath to "practise veterinary science ethically and conscientiously for the benefit of animal welfare, animal and human health, and the community."
- Because there is a community expectation for veterinary practices to admit stray dogs and cats, when the veterinary practice declines accepting a stray because it is unable physically or legally to retain it, and refers the community member to council, frequently there's harsh and damaging public backlash. This unjust backlash on the veterinary practice/veterinarian is general direct abuse, derogatory comments on social media and in negative business reviews which can negatively impact the business and the mental health of veterinary team members.

There is no consistent interaction between Councils and veterinary practices for the handling of stray animals. This may reflect individual interpretation of the *Companion Animal Act* by councils resulting in a range of policies with varying impacts on the welfare of stray animals and the conduct of veterinary practices. Veterinary practices are private enterprises, and it is unrealistic, in the current economic climate, for practices to provide de facto local government services to the detriment of their own business operations, professional reputation and financial viability.

Recommendation

The AVA urgently calls upon the NSW Government to investigate and implement state-wide consistent policy for the interaction between local government and veterinary practices in management of stray dogs and cats. This policy needs to address the issues identified with the stray animal intake process to councils, the management of injured strays, including reimbursement for veterinary treatment, housing, and arrangements addressing the associated financial impacts on veterinary practices for receiving/treating/housing strays.

Rural and regional workforce

Along with the rest of the country, NSW is experiencing a significant shortage of veterinarians. The long timeframe for training veterinarians (5-6years) means that the profession and the community it serves are currently exposed to a prolonged shortage that is now in its seventh year. This is most acutely felt in rural and regional areas of the State,



Without veterinarians in rural and regional areas risks emerge in Australia's food production and add to biosecurity risks. Veterinary education is expensive to deliver and student experiences particularly in the rural and regional sectors come at an increasing cost to both veterinary students and the veterinary profession. This results in fewer graduates working and choosing to remain in rural and regional areas. Given the importance of the veterinary profession to society and the role the profession plays in biosecurity, food security, the human-animal bond, human health and well-being, it is critical that veterinary positions in rural and regional Australia be filled.

Further analysis into the education and training of veterinary professionals to address labour market shortages – specifically in regional and rural areas and amongst early career vets is required. In the interim, funding to assist students to increase their exposure to areas of the profession that are suffering the greatest labour shortages, e.g farm animal veterinarians, public health, pathology, internal and external parasitology is likely to result in positive outcomes.

Recommendation

That the NSW government commit funding for further analysis of the veterinary workforce needs of NSW, especially regional and rural areas. Any analysis or strategies should be formulated with the cooperation of the AVA and be representative of the diversity of the profession across the state.

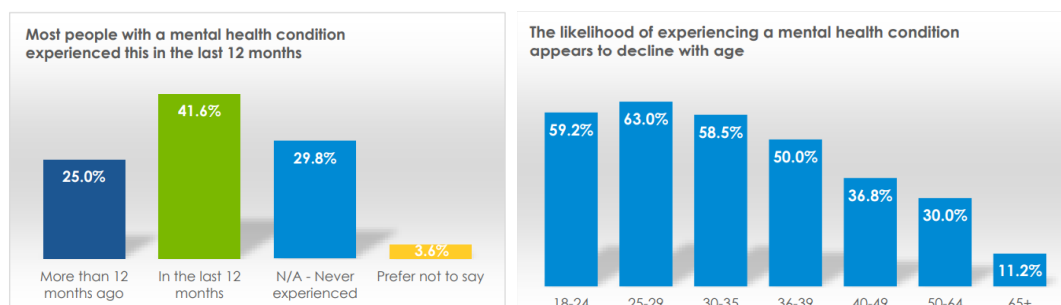
Veterinary professionals – at greater risk of poor mental health

Even prior to the onset of COVID 19, there were considerable wellness problems across a number of sectors in the veterinary profession. COVID 19 has exacerbated mental health issues within the veterinary profession. AVA commissioned independent research by workplace mental health consultants, SuperFriend, to investigate mental health amongst the profession. What has been found is that the issue needs to be addressed on multiple fronts, including financial stress, working conditions, high workload, long hours, poor remuneration and client relations.

The SuperFriend Veterinary Wellness Strategy Final Report found:

...a significant proportion of individuals have experienced a mental health condition, in particular in the last 12 months. Over half (66.6%) of respondents said they have or are experiencing a mental health condition. ... SuperFriend's multi-year research shows the prevalence of self-reported mental ill-health has increased during the recent years of the global pandemic, the veterinary profession sits 4.8% above other industries.⁴

More specifically, 41.6% of respondents to the survey indicated that they had experienced a mental health condition in the past 12 months:



This is more prevalent in the younger age categories, with 63% of respondents between 25-29 indicating they had experienced a mental health condition in the past 12 months. These younger cohorts represent the sections of the veterinary workforce suffering from the greatest attrition.

⁴ [Superfriend, Australian Veterinary Association Veterinary Wellness Strategy – Final Report, 2021.](#)



The AVA has identified a range of areas in which governments could assist:

- *Mental health training and support for veterinarians* - Government support for dedicated mental health training and support for veterinarians that includes:
 - Whole of career mentoring (from undergraduate veterinarians to veterinarians approaching retirement and beyond);
 - Dedicated veterinary counselling services;
 - Funding for veterinarians, veterinary nurses and practice managers to complete mental health literacy training.

Recommendation

That the NSW Government work with the AVA in funding a dedicated mental health program for veterinarians and para-veterinary professionals.

Contact:

The Australian Veterinary Association would welcome further discussion on the initiatives outlined in this 2023 NSW State Election Platform. For further information please contact Liz Gemes, Senior Advocacy Officer on liz.gemes@ava.com.au