

Report on Proceedings Before

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO.4 – REGIONAL NSW

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTGAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Wednesday 30 August 2023

Additional Information to the Evidence – Dr Patricia Clarke

Question 1

Question from Honourable Sarah Mitchell (page 11) regarding ‘Microcredentials’.

Dear The Honourable Sarah Mitchell

In my experience as a university lecturer, I am not that familiar with using the term micro-credentials for post-graduate qualifications in that context. For this reason, I hesitated at the Hearing to respond to your question on this topic. On reflection and tapping into my former experience as a vocational education teacher training veterinary nursing students at Certificate IV level (the current national qualification and has been since 1998), I believe I can respond to your question more fully.

I support the Australian Government’s agenda for microcredentials as a mechanism to build skills more quickly. I see this as being more effective particularly in the vocational education and training sector where a revised training package meant those with the older qualifications would have to undertake substantially expensive and time consuming upgrades to meet the requirements of the new qualification. I see microcredentials as a better way of dealing with the skills gaps in terms of time efficiencies, creating less stress and cost to those who are most likely already very experienced veterinary nurses. The microcredentials pathway also reduces employer stress about employees having current qualifications.

I also now recall discussion from time to time about using a microcredentials pathway to transition qualified Diploma of Veterinary Nurses into a Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing or Bachelor of Veterinary Technology. We would support this. At the same time, we would hope for some credit transfer arrangements to be possible.

There is a currently wealth of high quality post-graduate continuing professional development offered for veterinary technologists and veterinary nurses such as the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia’s annual national conference, the Australian Veterinary Association annually offers a Veterinary Business Group Conference, and some specialist veterinary practices offer annual conferences with a veterinary nurse stream. All of these would recruit international speakers to deliver parts of the program. Many universities deliver veterinary nursing conferences online and ‘face-to-face’ (The University of Queensland, James Cook University, and Sydney University’s Centre for Veterinary

Education). The concept of post-graduate certificates and diplomas as discussed by Gary Fitzgerald at the Hearing would serve well as microcredentials for veterinary nurses and veterinary technologists and we would welcome Government support for this type of training and education. This would be particularly valuable for upskilling in times of a veterinarian shortage.

Yours sincerely

Trish Clarke, on behalf of *Educators for the Veterinary Allied Health Professions in Higher Education* (Australia)

Dr Patricia Clarke BVSc (Hons IIA) PhD Grad Dip Ed

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Question from Honourable Sarah Mitchell (page 11) regarding why the paraprofessional bachelor degrees are not being offered at more universities.

Dear The Honourable Sarah Mitchell

I would like to elaborate on this point, please. There were informal discussions within other Veterinary Schools prior to Covid about setting up a bachelor's degree program in veterinary nursing/veterinary technology, for example James Cook University. However, Covid has seriously impacted university funding models particularly in programs that have a significant clinical component with additional costs involved. Veterinary technology/veterinary nursing also fits into this model, as well as veterinary science. However, it takes only three years to educate and train a bachelor's degree veterinary paraprofessional compared to a minimum of five years for a Bachelor of Veterinary Science (e.g. The University of Queensland) or six years for a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree (The University of Adelaide). In fact, a significant number of those entering the highly competitive veterinary science programs have already completed another degree, or at least one year of a university degree, to upgrade their score to become eligible for entry. Hence, it is more cost-effective and a faster process to graduate more veterinary paraprofessionals in this time of veterinarian shortages. You would also be aware of Southern Cross University's (Northern NSW) proposal to launch a Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing degree.

We believe educating more bachelor's degree veterinary paraprofessionals is a critical factor in addressing the veterinarian shortage which is a longer term issue. Additionally, in our 'Higher Education Educators' submission, we provided evidence from the United States and Canada that showed higher veterinary technician/veterinarian ratios resulted in greater business revenue and this would increase the sustainability of veterinary practices.

Yours sincerely

Trish Clarke, on behalf of *Educators for the Veterinary Allied Health Professions in Higher Education* (Australia)

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Conversation Topic 1 – Veterinarians' Salaries

Further Response to Conversation with The Honourable Cameron Murphy held during break on afternoon of Wednesday 30 August 2023.

Dear The Honourable Cameron Murphy,

After reflecting on our conversation about veterinarians' salaries, that included comparison with barristers' salaries, I thought it appropriate to provide you with some additional data that I sourced from the Australian Veterinary Association. Please see below, the contents of an email received on 8th September 2023 from Dr Cristy Secombe, Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs. Cristy has provided data from the veterinary profession and then there is the data that comes from the census and other sources.

Australian Veterinary Association salary 2021 (Extracts from the AVA submission)

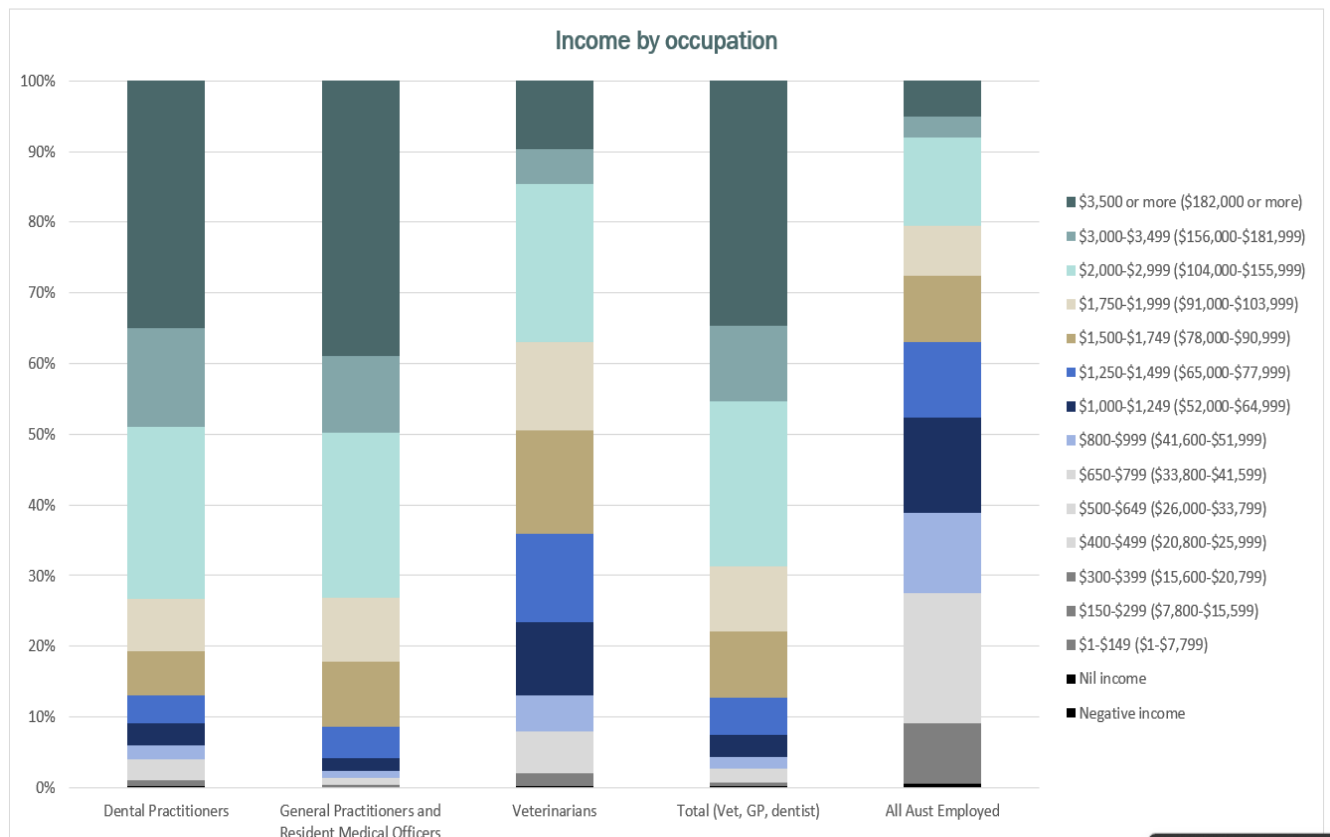


Figure 1. Weekly income by occupation (Census 2021)

This should also be considered in the context of the remuneration that is available to each of these comparable groups. Incomes of dental practitioners and general practitioners are similar with approximately 50% of each earning \$156,000 or more per annum. This compares with only 14.51% of veterinarians. Further, fewer than 20% of dental practitioners and general practitioners are earning less than \$91,000 pa, compared with just over 50% of veterinarians in that category.

part time participation rate.

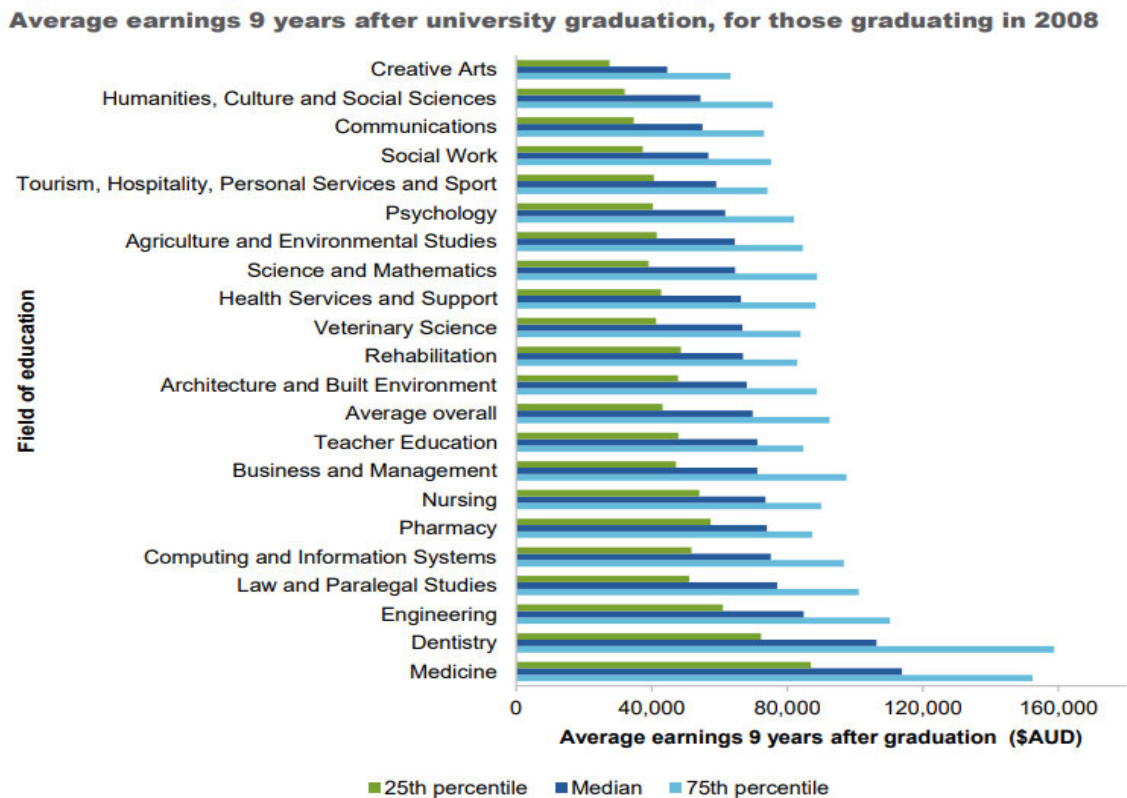


Figure 2. The Productivity Commission's 5-year Productivity Inquiry: From learning to growth, Interim report no. 5 – September 2022

Figure 2 demonstrates that veterinarians average earning 9 years after graduation are less than the **average** overall with high educational debt.

Veterinarians' salaries are low because the costs of running veterinary businesses are high – Ibis data

Ibis data for veterinary services suggests that for the profit margin for the last 5 years is 10.9 % , however it has to be noted that as most business are small businesses owned by veterinarians and the profit usually includes their salary, i.e. they don't necessarily include their wages in the expenses incurred by the business. Evidence for this is that Ibis states that wages account for ~36% of revenue whereas other data sources (not published) suggests that when market rate for owners wages are included wages account to ~43% of revenue.

It is appreciated that the business model for legal services and veterinary services are different. Please see the comparison of veterinary services and legal services over the page.

Table 1. A comparison of veterinary services and legal services according to IBIS data

| | Legal services | Veterinary services |
|---|----------------|--|
| Employees/ business | 4 | 7 |
| Revenue/ employee | \$290k | \$190K |
| Revenue/ business | \$1.3M | \$1.4M |
| Profit margin (18-23) | 17.4% | 10.9% |
| Profit/ business (18-23) | \$227K | \$154K |
| % of revenue spent on wages and infrastructure/ equipment | 41.5% | 69.8% (likely exclusive owners wages) |

Revenue / employee is likely to be significantly different due to the large amount of “free work” of “discounted work” that veterinary team members undertake for the public good. The veterinary services market cannot operate as a free market through supply and demand, as it’s an essential service (just like human health care) where services must be provided (through regulation) when 'needed'.

Yours sincerely

Dr Cristy Secombe



Dr Cristy Secombe, BSc BVMS MANZCVS MVSc(hons) Dip ACVIM PhD | Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs

Australian Veterinary Association

Thank you for considering this additional information.

Yours sincerely

Trish Clarke

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Conversation Topic 2 – Overseas qualified veterinarians

Further Response to Conversation with The Honourable Cameron Murphy held during break on afternoon of Wednesday 30 August 2023.

Dear The Honourable Cameron Murphy

Thank you for taking the time to converse with me during a break in proceedings. Reflecting on our conversation about the veterinary degrees approved by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC), I thought it appropriate to provide you with additional information based on my personal experience as a veterinarian who has recently worked closely with overseas qualified veterinarians while they have been completing the AVBC's Australasian Veterinary Examination.

I fully understand and appreciate your views as an external observer that the AVBC could be perceived as not as inclusive of veterinarians qualified in neighbouring countries, namely, those in Asia. However, in fairness to the AVBC, this is a very complex issue and needs to be examined in more detail to have a better understanding of the realities of working as a veterinarian in Australia. My experience with the AVBC is that they work very hard to support overseas veterinarians who undertake the Australasian Veterinary Examination; they take their responsibilities very seriously and conduct their work with great professionalism.

Therefore, I believe we need to look particularly at the small animal clients whom veterinarians service in Australia. Since the 1980s and 1990s, or even earlier, the human-animal bond has become increasingly important in Australia and internationally because of the changing role of domestic animals in society and growing public concern about the welfare of companion, production, and research animals (Flynn 1979; Brown & Silverman 1999; Fogle 1999). Changing societal values and the growing recognition of the human-animal bond, where the pet/pet owner relationship was more like that of parent/child (Berryman, Howells & Lloyd-Evans 1985) or members of a family, (Fogle 1999), has led to consumer expectations of constantly improving quality of veterinary services (Brown & Silverman 1999).

In addition, because of a long-term media-driven increase in public awareness concerning science, animals, animal production and health (Pritchard 1994), the veterinary profession has had to deliver increasingly higher levels of service, not only to companion animals, but to all species of animals important to people (Pritchard 1994). This change in the social status of animals has been accompanied by a change in their legal status, reflecting changing societal values, and thus transforming the delivery of veterinary services. This rising importance of the human-animal bond is reflected in a significant percentage of veterinary clients today who consider themselves 'pet parents'. Their pet is their child. This brings with it very high expectations of veterinary services analogous of parents taking their child to the doctor. Consequently, veterinary practice owners need to ensure those whom they employ not only

meet the standards set by their professional and regulatory bodies, but most importantly, they also meet the expectations of clients who view their pets as members of their family.

With this in mind, I have had recent and very rewarding experiences providing support to several overseas qualified veterinarians while they have been undertaking the multi-staged examinations (Academic English language test, Multiple Choice theory examination, and practical skills examination) administered by the AVBC. It is a rigorous and lengthy journey to registration for these veterinarians driven by a requirement to maintain professional standards, and importantly, to meet client expectations.

In meeting the required professional standards, communication skills are also critical to the role of the veterinary practitioner as well as clinical knowledge and skills. Research into the veterinary consultation process shows that communication and relational skills are vital for graduates (Tinga et al. 2001; Shaw 2006; Mossop & Gray 2008). For this reason, communication skills have received greater emphasis in the veterinary curriculum over the past 20 years. That said, the Academic English requirements for registration can create a barrier for overseas qualified veterinarians but the importance of communication in the veterinarian's role cannot be diminished.

Taking this into account, perhaps there needs to be improved support for veterinarians qualified in neighbouring countries to meet the standard of English required in a profession that has a heavy emphasis on client and professional communication. Veterinary medicine in Australia is now very sophisticated with the use of advanced technology in diagnostic imaging (x-rays, MRI, CT, ultrasound and endoscopy), medicine and surgery (laparoscopy), for example. In parallel, the veterinary team has been expanded by a large range of veterinary specialists (e.g. surgeons, ophthalmologists, oncologists, cardiologists, internal medicine, equine, animal physiotherapists and pathologists). The standards of veterinary practice in Australia are very high to meet the expectations of a society that considers their pet as a member of the family. We are also living in an increasingly litigious society. Consequently, for this reason and those mentioned previously, maintaining professional standards is paramount.

My personal and recent experience is that veterinary practice owners and employed veterinarians willingly put in a lot of additional time and energy to support overseas veterinarians in gaining the right to register in Australia. It is very much an altruistic endeavour over a period of at least one year minimum: a period of intense support (financial, professional and emotional), supervision and training. This could also include securing placements in other practices, such as a large animal practice, to prepare for the AVBC practical examination. This is in addition to the veterinarians involved managing their regular, busy workloads. To relieve pressure on all parties (AVBC, overseas qualified veterinarians and veterinarians), it might be timely for government to work with the AVBC and veterinary profession to provide more support for communications skills development. As identified, these are just as important as clinical skills in preparing a competent veterinary practitioner.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my views.

Yours sincerely

Trish Clarke

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