



24 April 2024

The Hon. Mark Banasiak MLC
Chair, Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW
Inquiry into veterinary workforce shortages in New South Wales
Parliament of New South Wales
6 Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

By email: portfoliocommittee4@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr Banasiak,

Committee visit to Charles Sturt University Wagga Wagga campus

We would like to extend our thanks to you and the rest of the Committee for taking the time to meet students and staff in the School of Agricultural, Environmental and Veterinary Sciences; during your recent visit to Charles Sturt University, and for your kind letter following the visit.

As mentioned in the University's submission to the inquiry and discussed during your visit, one key issue that warrants further consideration by the committee is the need for more veterinary technologists, specifically better recognition of the skills they bring to the veterinary profession, as well as how universities and TAFEs can work together to establish a recognised pathway and accreditation framework for the education/training of veterinary technologists.

It is important to distinguish between veterinary technologists and veterinary technicians. The former is a university-qualified professional holding at least a Bachelor's degree qualification. The latter is not.

As we discussed during your visit to the School, Charles Sturt University has a well-established Bachelor of Veterinary Technology degree program. It is offered in partnership with GOTAFE Victoria and integrates the Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing. Students at Charles Sturt University earn the Cert IV qualification during the course of their studies, while those who already have the Cert IV can get part credit toward their degree. Students graduate with an AQF7 level qualification and have the opportunity to pursue postgraduate study such as Master's or PhD. With recognition and regulation of the profession there is scope for veterinary technologists to move towards more specialised practitioner roles. Due to their university-science-based education, clinical nursing skills and in-depth animal health knowledge, veterinary technologists have great potential to enter a variety of career pathways within the animal health industry. The attached graphic (Figure 1) provides an illustration of the post-graduation pathways open to veterinary technology graduates.

The role of the veterinary technologist is often compared to that of a registered nurse / nurse practitioner in the human healthcare system, as they perform a role somewhere between that of a nurse and a doctor (or veterinarian). They can take x-rays or ultrasound images, complete in-clinic pathology (e.g., sample collections, biopsies), monitor anaesthesia, manage, and monitor wounds, and provide some kinds of professional advice on animal care (e.g., diet, behaviour, wellness management). By carrying out a wide range of essential tasks, veterinary technicians provide professional support to the veterinarian and allow the latter to focus on more demanding or complex animal health requirements. Veterinary technologist is therefore a career that supports a wide range of NSW and Australian Government industry and economic priorities, including food production and agritech industries, managing the natural environment, and strengthening biosecurity through early detection and treatment of exotic pests and diseases. A 2003 Review of Rural Veterinary Services for the then Department of Education, Science and Training cited US research that showed veterinary paraprofessionals such as laboratory technicians, stock inspectors and veterinary

technicians were making major contributions to animal health services. Even then Australia appeared to be lagging behind global trends in the utilisation of veterinary paraprofessionals, particularly in large animal services.

The veterinary technologist role is even more critical in a time of widespread workforce shortages within the healthcare and veterinary systems. The primary obstacle that prevents many veterinary technologists from properly fulfilling their role is that theirs is not a recognised profession in the Australian veterinary sector. Unlike the US and UK there is no regulatory or legislative framework for the profession, or indeed for veterinary nurses. This means they cannot perform key tasks independently, that is without a veterinarian in attendance. As veterinarians are legally liable for the work undertaken at their practice, many are reluctant to entrust key functions to veterinary technologists (or veterinary nurses) as the absence of appropriate regulation could put their own license and registration at risk. The lack of formal recognition of the veterinary technologist profession also means many of our students struggle to find clinical placements or appropriate supervision on the placements that are available.

The NSW Veterinary Accreditation Board raises these issues in their submission to the inquiry and note further that the lack of a definition for and recognition or regulation of some veterinary roles means that in NSW “any person is able to refer to themselves as a veterinary nurse or technician and perform duties assigned to veterinary nurses or technicians”, resulting in obvious risks to human and animal health.

The Board suggests, and Charles Sturt University agrees, that a formal accreditation process for veterinary nurses and veterinary technologists is warranted. This would help establish them both as professions, ensure those in the roles have the requisite knowledge and skills, and help meet critical workforce shortages in the veterinary sector. The NSW government has an opportunity to be a national leader in work towards this goal.

There is scope for the university to develop a similar arrangement with NSW TAFEs, although this would require investment in new facilities and equipment. Here, too, formal recognition of veterinary technologist as a profession would help as it would encourage more collaboration across the tertiary education sector.

In summary, the committee can help achieve this objective by recommending:

- (1) that the profession of veterinary technologist should be defined and recognised in the legislative and regulatory framework for veterinarians and animal health in NSW;
- (2) that the NSW Government commission research on the role of veterinary technicians and other veterinary paraprofessionals and how they can help fill workforce gaps in the sector;
- (3) measures to educate the public, the veterinary profession and relevant industry sectors on the role of veterinary technologists and the benefits they can provide to animal and human health and welfare;
- (4) encouraging universities and TAFE's, alongside state and national industry, professional, and other bodies to collaborate on the development of a curriculum, skills recognition, accreditation, registration, remuneration, and professional development framework for veterinary technologists; and
- (5) appropriate funding allocation for veterinary education, equipment and facilities in NSW universities and TAFEs.

I would be happy to provide the committee with more information on any of the issues raised in this letter.

Thank you again for taking the time to talk to students and staff during your visit to Wagga Wagga. I look forward to reading the committee's final report.

Yours sincerely,

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Dr Esther Callcott
Head of Discipline – Veterinary Technology

Professor Megan Smith
Executive Dean – Faculty of Science and Health



