

**Submission
No 119**

INQUIRY INTO ANIMAL CRUELTY LAWS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission – Legislative Council inquiry into Animal Cruelty

The relevance of my expertise and experience to the terms of reference are as follows:

1. My name is Dr Magdoline AWAD BVSc GradCertMgt MANZCVSc (Animal Welfare)
2. I was employed by RSPCA NSW between 1996 and 2015
3. I was the RSPCA NSW Chief Veterinarian from 2008 to 2015
4. I was elected to the Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW in 2019.
5. I am a member of the executive committee of the Australian Veterinary Association Welfare and Ethics special interest group
6. I am currently the Chief Veterinary Officer for Australia's largest pet insurance company PetSure. I am about to commence employment as Chief Veterinary Officer for Australia's largest veterinary group, Greencross Ltd.

I can comment as follows:

RSPCA NSW veterinarians and shelter staff have a specialised skill set that is not widely available in non-shelter or clinic environments.

RSPCA NSW vets bring to their job:

- Experience, knowledge and capacity in dealing with large numbers of animals,
- Expertise in understanding the issues related to herd health in small and large animal environments,
- Engagement with the Inspectorate in operational contexts,
- Knowledge of Chain of Custody and continuity of evidence, as well as training and experience in court appearances
- Understanding of POCTAA, associated codes of practice and companion animal legislation

In my experience veterinarians in private practice understandably do not want to have conflict with their potential clients. This makes them less likely to want to get involved in prosecutions. They do not have the capacity or will to attend court so actively avoid it. This needs to be understood in terms of the context of the shortage of veterinarians in Australia generally. This creates issues for regular veterinary practices, especially with cases involving large numbers of animals that will require significant investment of time in assessment, treatment and management, as well as the time taken to produce expert evidence reports and appearances in Court.

External or non-shelter vets are often unwilling in my experience to perform these functions. RSPCA NSW vets understand these matters and have experience treating the involved animals in a timely manner, pre-empting potential medical and mental health issues, based on years of experience with this cohort of animals.

Dealing with animals that are the subject of animal cruelty investigations requires high level management of their medical and mental health conditions. Decisions on euthanasia are not made lightly, and take into consideration:

- the number of adopters that have the capacity and skills to take on high-needs animals,
- the ability for these animals to have a good quality of life. This is assessed by RSPCA NSW veterinarians, occasionally supported by specialist veterinarians, particularly in respect of difficult cases. For example, animals from large scale hoarder or puppy farm environments.
- the safety of the community and the future well-being of the owners that take on these animals. Community expectations and legislation require RSPCA NSW not to rehome dangerous animals into the public domain.

RSPCA NSW vets are acutely aware of the issues experienced by animals held in custody pending court determination. Animals may be held in custody long term, and whilst in custody vets and shelter staff are constantly monitoring their health and welfare. RSPCA NSW has specifically evolved over the years to perform all of these functions which otherwise would have to be split up over many different organisations. If the Inspectorate, veterinary and shelter services were fractured this would result in inefficiencies that impact not only the welfare of the animals in custody, but also the potential outcomes of court cases. This would lead to increased costs for the community and puts at risk successful prosecutions.

RSPCA NSW has unique and decades long experience dealing with law enforcement (Inspectorate), vet clinic and shelter environments. In my experience working for RSPCA NSW the refinements of processes over the years has resulted in constant improvements in the outcomes for animals. Many RSPCA veterinarians have post graduate training in animal welfare, shelter medicine and forensics. RSPCA attracts vets with a particular interest in animal welfare which is in line with the philosophy of the RSPCA and community expectations.

Although I no longer work for RSPCA NSW, I support the RSPCA's continued enforcement of POCTAA as I strongly believe that there is a risk of poor animal welfare outcomes if this function was transferred to an organisation that did not have animal welfare as its core objective.