

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Dr Steven Roberts

Date Received: 16 June 2023

SUBMISSION TO NSW PARLIAMENT ON VETERINARY SHORTAGE

This submission provides the perspective of a 76 year old graduate of 53 years, who worked in mixed practice for 18 years, the federal Department of Agriculture for 23 years and now in part time equine practice. The issues as I see them are:

1. Selection of undergraduates – many appear to be unsuited to the rigours of veterinary practice. They have unrealistic expectations of what the work involves. It is a difficult task for universities to “vet” students’ suitabilities, particularly with the current university funding model that partly relies on student numbers. The veterinary faculty is the most expensive one to run, so universities seek numbers.

This factor also drives universities to “artificially” support unsuitable students during the course so that they retain the funding. This results in graduates unfit for practice, including those who may be a danger to themselves or the public, or their patients.

2. Efforts are currently being made to ensure that curricula provide suitable skills so that new graduates are “practice ready” and this needs to continue. Formerly curricula placed too much emphasis on high tech medicine to the detriment of practical skills. Too many new graduates falter early in practice because they do not have the requisite skills, nor do many modern graduates come with life coping skills, so once they experience pressure or failure, they quit.
3. The AVA and EVA provide some mentoring for new graduates, but less than half are members, so support is not always provided. Our Associations need to do better at attracting membership.
4. Large animal practice, especially in rural and remote areas, needs the support of paid participation in government disease control and monitoring schemes; a good example was the BTEC scheme. Such activities save governments money by having private practitioners do the work that, to a large extent, is no longer done by government veterinarians, due to severe funding cuts to state departments.

Australia is the world’s largest meat exporter and rural practitioners provide vital services to help producers remain profitable. Routine government work by private practitioners provides entry onto properties, thereby familiarising producers with what vets can offer, and at times reducing the travelling cost of a visit for private work.

5. Practice managers need to learn how to balance work demands with graduates' skills and need for work/life balance. They should be prepared to employ multiple vets, with each vet working 1 to 5 days a week for example. With the overwhelming majority of new graduates being female, this is essential, so that child bearing is not seen as a threat to employment.
6. The veterinary associations should provide explanatory material to their members to facilitate explanation to clients of the expenses involved in running a practice e.g. highlighting the differences to a GP. A better understanding by clients would enable charging of more realistic fees, making practices more sustainable.

Steven Roberts

16 June 2023