

**INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 22 June 2023

Partially
Confidential

To Whom it May Concern,

Re: NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in NSW

I am a NSW registered veterinarian, with 15 years of experience in the veterinary profession; the last seven years of that practicing as a mixed practice and government veterinarian. I am acutely aware of the shortage of veterinarians across the profession and in particular the impact this has on rural and regional veterinarians across Australia. As the shortage worsens, it puts even more pressure on those still practicing, which risks worsening the situation wherein vets keep leaving. While there is no silver bullet for this issue, it is pertinent that across the profession, and in conjunction with government and the community, we work together to help solve this issue.

In the past seven years I have worked in three mixed practice rural veterinary clinics and for Local Land Services as a district veterinarian. Each of these practices has had long standing recruiting issues, taking *years* to employ permanent veterinarians. From my perspective, the main contributing factors include access to other services in rural communities, the high workload for relatively poor remuneration, the requirement for provision of after hours care, the ambiguity surrounding provision of care to stray animals and wildlife, the difficulties with providing emergency care to non-paying clients, and having to deal with finances plus how this is often at odds with good veterinary medicine.

Regional Services

It is an often-heard issue that while living in a regional or rural community affords a wonderful lifestyle, it also comes with limited access to vital services, such as healthcare, housing, childcare, and education opportunities. I do not think we can look at the shortage of vets outside of large cities without considering these compounding factors.

I know firsthand the difficulties of finding childcare, and how imperative this is for me to be able to practice, as well as contribute to society, as a single working mother. I initially registered for childcare when I was just 12 weeks pregnant, over a year later I considered myself very lucky to be offered three days a week, and after some 'string pulling' managed to get four days. I am now practicing in a different state and again, it took almost a year to get four days per week, and feel lucky I can get family care for day five. Being a single parent also significantly impacts upon my ability to do after hours and emergency work. This impacted my decision to change from full time mixed practice work, to primarily working as a district veterinarian which affords me regular, 'daycare friendly' working hours.

Poor Remuneration and HECS/HELP Debt

It is well known that veterinarians spend a large amount of time at university to become qualified, and from this usually acquire significant HECS/HELP debt. Due to our relatively low remuneration, many of these debts are just rising as the rate of indexation is higher than our wage increases. This is compounded by the rising cost of living facing all Australians, so any excess funds certainly do not go towards reducing HECS debt. A potential strategy is to pay out all or part of a veterinarian's HECS debt upon working in areas more hard-hit by a vet shortage. This strategy is already being adopted by larger corporations to recruit, and retain, veterinarians.

While the public are somewhat aware of our study expenses, they are not aware of our relatively poor incomes. Many think that what they consider to be huge vet bills go directly into the veterinarian's pockets. Unfortunately this is not true on many fronts. When I graduated just seven years ago, I had school friends graduating from primary school teaching degrees who were starting on a salary almost \$20,000 more than I was.

Currently the only way for vets to get paid more is for the business to either a) increase throughput of patients (difficult when most practices are already working above capacity) or b) charge more for services. Certainly, in regional communities vets struggle with this, as we see ourselves first as animal carers, then as business managers. It is difficult when you know you will be isolating vulnerable clients and patients by increasing pricing, but something that needs to be considered so staff can be paid at a rate reflecting their knowledge and skill sets.

A potential aid to this may be industry bodies, particularly those for livestock, subsidising wages for large animal, industry or mixed practice veterinarians to help ensure that producers have access to adequate vets. This may allow rural, regional and industry practices to attract and then retain veterinarians through offering higher remuneration. For industry it ensures there is ready access to veterinary care.

After Hours Services

While I regularly hear stories of overflowing emergency vet hospitals in the city, I envy general practice vets in the area that they at least have the option of not offering after-hours care and referring their clients to emergency facilities. In regional and rural areas it is not so simple, and clinics must offer after hours care. This care is often far more stressful to provide – working with emergency or urgent care cases, distressed clients, and higher costs to owners, it is often a melting pot for conflict.

It also takes a huge toll on the vets in terms of working hours. It is not unheard of for a vet to be on call and see multiple cases in a night, only to front up and work a fully booked day in clinic the next day. It is usually not financially viable for practice owners to employ a sole emergency hours vet and not have them do regular hours work, as the after hours calls can be so variable in number and thus income for the practice. It is also problematic that if the on call vet does have a large after hours

caseload, there is difficulties in re-scheduling the day's routine consultations and surgeries.

It may be helpful to not mandate the provision of after hours care or reduce the hours it needs to be provided (eg. not between midnight and 6am). It may also be helpful for larger regional centres to have clinics band together to cover the after-hours roster for the whole region, instead of doing their own. Or, perhaps only see current clients of that practice and not take on any new clients for emergency work.

Gender Dynamics

After hours services can be even more difficult to staff with so many graduating vets now being young women who go on to have families. Even working fulfilling veterinary careers many of these female vets take on the role of homemaker and default parent, and so want to reduce working hours to allow for family and home life. One option may be to employ additional vets, all working part time. This would not only allow vets to not work full time hours, but also more vets within the practice would mean a lesser share in after hours work. For a three full-time-equivalent vet clinic, employing five vets would create a huge afterhours decrease – one weekend in five sounds much better for work-life balance than one in three!

In my experience there are also few clinics offering maternity leave. If this maternity (or paternity) leave could be additionally funded or mandated, it may improve retention of vets with return to industry after taking time off for their family.

Support of New Graduates, Interns and Residents

New or recent graduate veterinarians, interns and residents are often the most vulnerable to the difficulties of a veterinary carer. This includes working long hours, still trying to learn while working, and finding their feet when dealing with clients (often the most difficult part of the job). The boundaries are often pushed by employers with acceptable amounts of overtime for these members of the veterinary community as well.

It would be helpful to make it clear what is acceptable, and how this can be regulated or at least reported by staff if working hours are too long. Additional professional mentoring would also be incredibly helpful. Another story that I feel personally – when I graduated the Australian Veterinary Association was running a new graduate mentoring program. This program connected new or recently graduated vets and paired them with those who had spent more time working in the profession. While this program was fantastic and provided someone impartial to talk issues through with, it lacked specific professional advice on aspects such as workplace law, conflict resolution, effective communication strategies, building resilience, and mental wellbeing. In hindsight I could have benefited from this so much in my first year of veterinary practice. Instead, I had to find my own assistance and build my both my knowledge base and coping strategies myself. It would be invaluable to have a set service like this available.

Ambiguity Around Treatment of Stray Animals and Wildlife

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and it is a personal or clinic-based decision about the treatment when it comes to the provision of veterinary care for stray or unowned animals and wildlife. The financial cost of this care is usually borne by the clinic. While vets are obligated to provide emergency first aid to any animal presented to us, there is no routine approach across the state. Some practices will refuse to see these animals, while others will provide pro-bono gold-standard care and rehoming options. While it is obviously up to individuals and has ethical and moral components, a better grounding in law would be helpful. This then needs to be conveyed to veterinarians so they are aware what they can and cannot do. It also needs to be conveyed to the public. I have been personally verbally abused when I have not been willing to see stray cats afterhours for treatment, will not board stray dogs, or will not offer an after hours consultation to a non-emergency wildlife case. Vets need not only financial support for these cases but regulatory support, and the support to refer them to appropriate registered carers, pounds and welfare providers. Local governments also need to be prepared to compensate vets for their services, and not expect care of surrendered or stray animals at no or significantly reduced costs.

Client Finances

Ask any vet, and one of the biggest impacts on their job satisfaction is having conversations and making decisions based on finances. It is the largest contributor of tension between veterinarians and clients, and impacts upon the vet's ability to do their job every day. This, coupled with the growing expectation for gold standard care, is placing increased pressure on a profession of people who want to help animals, not who want to feel like they are working in retail.

First and foremost veterinarians are scientists, often being critical of the diagnostics and treatment we can provide. We are also generally very empathetic people and want to do all we can for our patients. There is a disconnect between the true cost of care and perceived cost of care due to Australia's wonderful public health system including Medicare. We need to be able to educate the public on the true cost of healthcare, and why looking at raw figures veterinary care is so much cheaper compared with the human equivalent. Animal ownership is a responsibility and with that comes the financial planning for appropriate veterinary care.

Even with owners not being able to financially afford, or declining gold standard care options, vets still must document all of these options due to the fear of litigation and involvement of the Veterinary Practitioners Board. We are having to write histories and case notes that are more detailed than ever, which eats into time where we could be providing meaningful care to pets, livestock and other animals. Saying a physical examination is 'within normal limits' is no longer good enough and notes are becoming ever more detailed. On an industry level, in consultation with the relevant state Vet Practitioners Board, this is something that needs to be considered, and to an extent rectified to resemble something that is adequate but not so time consuming.

Treatment by Lay People and Industry Deregulation

I do not believe treatment of animals by lay people, or deregulation of medications is the answer to the shortage of veterinarians. Take for example dentistry, vets have skills far and above those of 'equine dentists'. We are trained to consider the whole animal and the ability to diagnose and address underlying dental pathology instead of 'just floating' teeth. Inappropriate treatment by lay people often leads to more severe disease, like seemingly clean canine teeth having severe periodontal disease and rotting away bone below the gumline. Medications in the hands of non-veterinarians can also be disastrous, setting up industry for food residues, antibiotic resistance, and animal deaths.

For lay people charging for their services, there needs to be some degree of licencing and registration. While acts of veterinary science are regulated by the Vet Boards if performed by registered veterinarians, they are rarely enforced or prosecuted if performed by non-veterinarians. Lay people performing animal care services need to be held legally accountable in some way.

Support Staff, Nurses, and Technicians

While there is less issues recruiting and retaining support staff, veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians, there is also many unqualified staff members working within the industry. As a profession I think we need to utilise qualified nurses and veterinary technicians to a higher level, like vet techs in the United States of America or registered veterinary nurses in the United Kingdom. We and in extension the public, need to value the training of these individuals and the time put into gaining an extensive knowledge and skill set. The veterinary profession then needs to use these allied staff to provide basic consultations, advice, diagnostic and procedural assistance. We need to move away from vets providing 'free advice' over the phone and writing up extensive notes. Valuing vet time will allow for them to perform vet-only duties and allow the practice to be more profitable because of this. It will also allow for career progression and job satisfaction of our paraveterinary staff.

There are so many facets to the issue of the shortage of veterinarians – be that primary employment or retention. The issues surrounding all regional communities, rates of pay, debt and working hours, maintaining a work-life-balance, and battling with client finances and standards of care are all considerations when it comes to this huge issue. Please feel free to contact me for further comment on this issue, on (private) _____, (work) _____ or at _____.