

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

**Comments for: The Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW Terms of Reference
(TOR) Portfolio Committee 4**

The shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry, and pathology.

My understanding is this problem is NOT caused by a lack of veterinary graduates, but due to lack of retention rates within the industry.

Another contributing factor is the amount of time each veterinarian spends with each patient at each visit. This has steadily increased over time. As a sweeping generalisation I would say each visit has tripled over my 30 year career. Consultations times used to be 10 to 15mins, they now are commonly 30min. It is a product of higher client demands, and the goal of veterinarians to perform "gold-standard" care. It has had an affect of more vets seeing less patients.

The challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates.

I believe retention is the biggest problem facing the industry, and the contributing factors in my opinion are:

1) Over-representation of females in the work force.

70 to 80% of veterinary graduates have been female in recent years.

I know this is a controversial thing to say, but being female, I believe I can say it.

Resulting in:

a) Less time in the work force.

We are still the sex that takes on more child-rearing responsibilities, and in my observations and personal experience, not because we are forced to but because that is our preference. We spend months to years out of the work force and very commonly return on a part-time basis. Culminating in earlier retirement. Although I am on the low end of this spectrum, I still consider at least 50% of my working career will be part time (eg 64h/week) and I aim to retire at age 60 years. In contrast, my husband has always worked full-time and will aim to retire at age 65 years. The factor that may delay my retirement will be the veterinarian shortage.

b) Less likely to buy a veterinary practice either sole charge or in a partnership.

I believe this has 2 negative impacts for the profession.

- (i) Practice ownership will generally result in more commitment to seeing clients (and hence more "effective" work hours), more willingness to do extra hours (seeing patients or doing "book work"). And we do this more willingly and "unaccounted" as it is often in our own best interests, but also looking after those clients we have got to know and care for over the years. It is therefore not seen as such a burden.
- (ii) Practice ownership has traditionally been the most lucrative pathway. There is much talk of the profession being a low-paid profession. In the past I believe a common pathway would have been for a 2-to-3-man vet practice to rely on partnership prospects for succession planning, business development and income growth. Clearly the growth of corporate ownership of veterinary practices and siphoning profits away from veterinarians is not purely due to a female dominated veterinary profession, but it is a significant contributing factor.

2) Clear career pathways and progression

Somewhat paradoxical to this statement, I do believe our profession offers a huge diversity of career pathways providing opportunities for professional development and income progression.

To name a few examples:

- Part-time work opportunities (the paradoxical curse and saviour of the profession)
- Locum work opportunities
- Emergency and after hour work (leading to a 1.5 to 2x loading on income)
- Teaching and university pathways
- Industry roles
- Research pathways
- Practice ownership
- Management roles
- Clinical specialisation

However, perhaps the pathways with their respective income-generation streams could somehow be better structured or recognised (perhaps at the undergraduate level) so that career expectations can be met by real-life experiences and rewards.

The burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession

I believe expectations should match experience to enable career satisfaction and fulfillment.

In other words, having realistic expectations is important.

For example:

- 1) Veterinarians should expect to service after hour needs of their clients. This should be a shared responsibility.
- 2) It is impossible to perform "gold-standard" veterinary practice unless you have recently become a specialist in a given field.

Let me explain this statement.

I have employed many new graduates over the years. They universally state that they are motivated learners and want to practice veterinary medicine at the highest level.

(I have no such expectations of them (or myself). I would like them to practice at a minimum standard and aim to progress).

They commonly feel inadequate and unfulfilled as they are not fulfilling their unrealistic expectations of themselves after 2 or 3 years in practice. Their demand for further post-graduate, in-house training is insatiable and cannot replace in-job (primary case-responsibility) experience.

I am not clear how to solve this problem. The wanting to be better is both "necessary" and "a curse". A balance is needed.

Some ideas:

- Undergraduate teaching of the realities of the veterinary profession and career pathways
- Undergraduate streaming of small animal and large/mixed practice studies (with a limit on small animal practice positions).
- better career pathways or roles (vague ideas of a structure like the Medicine field eg interns, residents, registrars, consultants that can somehow be adopted to a general practice setting as well as universities and industry).
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The role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses

This is a whole topic in itself I will leave for another day. But a few brief comments

- Allowing limited ability to perform “professional tasks” eg vaccinations, post-op checks, wellness exams etc

The role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians

I understand there are challenges here, however, I have successfully employed many overseas veterinarians (both from AVBC-approved veterinary institutions and those that are not approved – after which the individual has completed the AVBC examination process).

The arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services.

Being an owner of a combined general practice and emergency center facility, I have strong feelings about this.

Like all emergency facilities we have been unable to employ enough veterinarians to cater for the client demand. We have had many nights we have had to close (not offer a service) as we have not been able to fill the shift. I avoided this for a couple of years by filling the shifts myself, and working 20 to 24 hours shifts, but have stopped doing this.

The Veterinary Board of Victoria mandates that all veterinarians must offer an after-hour service (and I presume this is the same in NSW). The veterinary industry has evolved from individual practices performing their own after-hours care, to banding together to provide a combined service for a suburb, to now mostly sending all after hours clients to a regional emergency facility. Leading to an expectation amongst many veterinarians that they can avoid any after-hours work responsibilities. This is a model that has worked quite well until the industry wide veterinary shortage. There now must be a way that individual general practitioners that rely on regional emergency services to perform their after-hours care are held accountable for adequate staffing of those after hour services. Clearly (and somewhat paradoxically!) this topic is a quagmire! A bold (ridiculous?) suggestion: all veterinarians must work 20% of their time in an after-hours role for 2 years of their career in order to fulfill the Veterinary Board mandate of providing after-hours services.

The issues faced by suburban emergency centres pale into insignificance by the issues our rural veterinary practices face. But again, if the Veterinary Boards mandate that veterinarians must offer an after-hours service, this should become an individual veterinarian responsibility and it should be at least equal for veterinarians that practice within cities and regionally.

Lastly, can I point out that although critical care provided by many emergency centres is a demanding and semi-specialist field, the vast majority of patients seen after hours do not require these services. So there is no barrier for a reasonably well rounded veterinarian of 2 to 4 years experience working within an emergency centre, particularly because sole-charge would not normally be required.

the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians

the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

I believe there should be financial benefit for veterinarians choosing to work in these areas of reduction of HECS debt rebates. This should benefit should extend to 4 years of practice.

Ensuring there is no benefit in the amount of after-hour work a city based veterinarian must perform compared to their regional counterparts would help to improve these challenges.

the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations

Our facility performs a large amount of gratis work in this area – on average we are involved with 3 to 5 stray animals per day and 3 to 5 wildlife per day.

Suggestion: government funded facilities, or positions, that cater for this. There are many veterinarians that would love to be employed in these roles.

Although it is a “burden” that our facility must manage, it is also something we accept comes with the territory. A small “reward” for service would however go a long way!

the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others

I offer only the comment that some veterinary care is better than no veterinary care, and an understanding that underservicing clients rather than not servicing clients should be viewed favourably by regulatory bodies (and individual veterinarians).

current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations

A great deal of career satisfaction comes from helping clients and their animal charges even when there are no financial rewards. This comment is overshadowed by the strong calls in the veterinary work force of being underpaid and underappreciated by clients and employers. The veterinary shortage has certainly improved incomes for veterinarians, it has come at a cost at limiting affordability of veterinary care and the recognition that reward is not always financial.

strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practicing veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

strategies to improve access to veterinary care

any other related matter.