

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

Organisation: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

The veterinary shortage in NSW, Australia and globally is a self-perpetuating crisis. Veterinarians have a critical role to play in agriculture, research, food safety, biodiversity, public health, animal welfare and mental wellbeing.

As a small animal veterinarian I am most qualified to provide insight into the challenges we as small animal vets and business owners are facing. Through the pandemic, the role of pets in the family took a distinctive shift from a town addition, to an integral member of the family. Animals provided valuable companionship in a period of social isolation, and research on the benefits of pet ownership consistently points to enhanced physical and psychological wellbeing. During the pandemic we saw increasing numbers of people buying or adopting pets, and veterinary teams faced increased demand, with limitations and restrictions on the way we could practice using non-contact methods. As essential workers we came to work to help clients and their beloved pets when others could work from home.

The toll of the past few years on society in general is huge. Our culture has shifted to one of uncertainty, isolation and fear. Our clients are increasingly concerned about their financial health and the wellbeing of their pet, and the two often conflicting needs leaves veterinarians as the 'gatekeepers' who can provide one service at the expense of the other. We are in the firing line on a daily basis. We are accused of being mercenary when our motivations are generally philanthropic in contrast. We are threatened, intimidated, bullied. We work long hours for relatively poor remuneration. New graduates are facing enormous financial pressures as a result of high university debt and inflation. The wages they are demanding are often not sustainable for small family-owned practices who are often operating on small profit margins.

Veterinarians are leaving the profession (clinical practice) in favour of lower stress jobs with better remuneration. This increases the pressure on those left. Job advertisements, especially in rural and regional areas are left vacant with few to no applicants for months to years. The rise of recruitment and headhunting from corporate practices has resulted in smaller businesses losing Veterinarians to promises that are often unfulfilled.

Perfectionism, anxiety, imposter syndrome, depression and other mental health conditions are rife. Obstacles to obtaining support are limited by time and financial pressures.

Housing availability and affordability is another major obstacle to businesses recruiting staff.

Veterinarians are innovative and have adapted by upskilling veterinary nurses to cover aspects of veterinary work traditionally done by vets.

Universities are not preparing graduates for financial constraints faced in practice and in vital soft skills like interpersonal communication and self care.

As a new small business owner, I have faced:

- Advertising a position with no qualified applications in 6 months. This was advertised on seek, social media and all the university job boards.
- Having found a vet, but she was unable to find affordable housing that would accept dogs (because every vet usually owns animals!)
- Bringing this vet on to my team to be faced with her significant mental health struggles and my struggle as a business owner to support her and create a safe psychosocial work environment (my financial and time investments into this have been significant).

We need:

- Greater housing availability allowing pet owners equal opportunity
- Tighter control over short term rentals/airbnb/stayz and tax incentives for landlords to offer permanent rentals rather than the more lucrative holiday rental market which is significant in our regional tourist town
- FEE-HELP subsidies for graduates, given the debts are similar to those of much higher earning professions but historical vet salaries have not exceeded \$100K. This is shifting, but is becoming unaffordable for business owners.
- Support for businesses and candidates in pursuing international recruitment/sponsorship, visa assistance
- Incentives for international students studying at Australian universities to stay in Australia
- Teaching of soft skills at University including leadership, communication, resilience, mindset, self care, financial management
- Mental health services and support for vets and business owners
- Public education about the cost of veterinary fees with reference to human medicine which is heavily subsidised by medicare
- Promotion of pet insurance and regulation of the pet insurance industry so meaningful coverage can be obtained.
- Public education about respect and greater protection for vets and businesses against defamation/libel on Google and social media.
- Greater support for veterinary emergency centres and telehealth opportunities which provide better work life balance for vets.
- Subsidised return to work programs and greater flexibility for vets who have taken a career hiatus due to child caring responsibilities.
- TV and celebrity vet programs including the 'human' element and the lows of practice as well as the highs to build Public awareness and empathy for vets
- Support and promotion of the 'Sophie's Legacy' campaign
- Wage subsidies or other financial support for struggling businesses.