

**Submission
No 21**

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

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Submission to inquiry into veterinary crisis in NSW

As an old age pensioner with a dog that has been diagnosed with idiopathic epilepsy I struggle to pay for the veterinary care and medications that are essential in keeping my dog alive. Since July last year when my dog was diagnosed with idiopathic epilepsy my dog has been hospitalised on four occasions because he would not stop seizing. This has cost me thousands of dollars in vet fees for these hospitalisations as well as the regular visits to assess the progress of his treatment. In addition, I need to pay for four medications which cost me hundreds of dollars each month out of my aged pension just to keep my dog's condition under control.

Due to the high costs of my dog's medications I started a Facebook group called PBS4Pets to lobby the Federal government to introduce a Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme for pets. I believe that pets deserve a PBS given the health benefits (physical and mental) they provide e.g. ***"one study found that Australian ownership of cats and dogs saved approximately \$3.86 billion in health expenditure over one year."*** And ***"The report has found that on average, pet owners are spending \$3200 per dog and \$2100 per cat each year – primarily on food, veterinary services and healthcare. If we extrapolate this across the country, given the current pet ownership statistics, this equates to cat owners having spent \$10.2 billion, and dog owners having spent a whopping \$20.5 billion in the last year."*** Source: Animal Medicines Australia (AMA) 2021 Reportⁱ

This means that approximately \$3.7 billion in GST was collected from cat and dog owners in that year alone. Given that NSW receives approximately 30% of the GST collected by the Federal government this means NSW cat and dog owners contributed over \$1 billion to NSW government revenues in one year. Our petition to the Federal parliament and my emails to Federal ministers have been met with a lot of negativity and I have been told basically that it is not their problem. That it is up to the owner of the pet to pay for their pet's healthcare and other taxpayers should not have to subsidise pet owners for their choice of owning a pet. Pet owners have chosen to own their pets but they haven't chosen for those pets to be sick or injured and then to be taxed for their misfortune.

Given that the government taxes pet owners for having sick pets and then taxes the medications needed to treat these sick pets I believe the government should assist pet owners to care for sick or injured pets. I feel that as other taxpayers don't pay the GST pet owners must pay when their pet requires veterinary care or medications then that the GST collected from pet owners should be allocated for subsidising these costs. In addition the approximately \$3.86 billion in health expenditure savings in one year alone from Australian ownership of cats and dogs benefits both Federal and State governments revenues and could also be used to subsidise costs of veterinary care or pet medications.

One of the contributing factors to the neglect, abandonment and surrender of pets is the high cost of veterinary services and like the proposed Veticare from the Animal Justice Party and our PBS4Pets they would help to reduce these costs which could in turn help to reduce the number of neglected, abandoned or surrendered pets. The cost of veterinary care can also cause friction between pet owners and veterinarians and their staff which can impact adversely on their mental health. The main

cause of this problem is the public's lack of knowledge and understanding that there are no government subsidies for pet healthcare unlike our healthcare system which is subsidised through Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

Perhaps a driving force in vet crisis is the corporatisation of the pet healthcare industry and the pet industry as a whole. This has resulted in many independent veterinary clinics being purchased by large corporations and many vets and their staff working under pressure to maximise the profits for the new owners. While many pet stores have also been bought or forced out by large corporations or large corporations have simply introduced their own pet supply section within their current stores to cash in on the profits generated by our pets. It seems to me that there is an attitude that has developed within the pet industry where our pets are seen as four legged ATMs with the government benefiting from the GST generated with every purchase or vet visit.

On a personal note I believe that better regulation of flea, tick and heartworm treatments could lead to a greater degree of animal health safety and less pet owners having pets suffering from idiopathic epilepsy or even death. Currently, flea, tick and heartworm treatment are sold without the need to have a pet's health assessed by a veterinarian to determine if they are well enough to be treated. For example, if a dog is already infected with adult heartworms then a heartworm preventative will not kill the adult heartworms. This could lead to the dog getting sicker and sicker over time and infecting mosquitoes that could then infect other dogs. Or if a dog has hypothyroidism which can cause seizures anyway and when they are treated with these products their seizures can worsen resulting in an increase in the need for costly veterinary services including hospitalisations.

One of the problems with these products is that any warnings are either in small print which are hard to read or they are on product information leaflets which cannot be accessed until after the product is purchased. Additionally, it cannot be determined if these product information leaflets are even read by pet owners before they treat their pets with these poisons. It seems even some veterinarians don't read the warnings on these product information leaflets that often state to use with caution on sick, debilitated and underweight animals and those with a history of seizures because a few months ago I was asked by a vet if my dog's flea, tick and heartworm treatments were up to date. When I said no as these products shouldn't be given to epileptic dogs I was met with a blank stare. Then recently I had my dog tested for heartworm and was told by another vet that it was good news he doesn't have heartworm now we have to get him on some preventative treatment. Again I said I didn't think that was a good idea due to his epilepsy and besides mosquitoes cannot become infectious with heartworm until the minimum temperature is above 14 degrees for at least 10 days and it was -1 overnight so I think I have some time before I have to worry about it.

I have requested that the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority increase the visibility of the warnings on these products or to make them only available for purchase with a prescription from a veterinarian as required in the USA and UK. A quick trip to get your pet's health assessed before giving your pet these poisons could save you thousands of dollars and even the life of your pet. I know I would not give these poisons to my dog if I had known that he was already suffering from hypothyroidism and that one of the adverse effects they can cause is seizures.

I offer all veterinarians and their staff my support in overcoming their current problems and suggest that they also support either a PBS4Pets or Veticare to show their support for pet owners who are suffering from cost of living pressures that can have an impact on their mental health. Pet owners should not have to choose between paying bills, rent or mortgage payments, putting food on the table and paying for expensive pet medications. Perhaps one of the recommendations from this inquiry will lead to some sort of subsidised veterinary care and/or pet medications that could improve the relationships between veterinarians, their staff and pet owners which could in turn help to reduce the stress and mental health issues facing veterinarians and their staff.

ⁱ Source: <https://www.vetvoice.com.au/articles/ama-report-highlights-vital-role-of-veterinarians-in-society/>