

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

**Name:** Name suppressed

**Date Received:** 26 June 2023

---

Partially  
Confidential

## **Veterinarians in NSW Landscape**

Submission to NSW Parliamentary Inquiry

June 2023

### **1. Context**

Since the early 1970's I worked for what is now NSW Department of Primary Industries in many roles that necessitated a close working relationship with both government and private veterinarians. For my first two decades I worked in the diagnostic services for animal health across NSW, and for the remainder of that time I lead the department's prevention, preparedness, response and recovery for emergencies including animal health / biosecurity emergency responses.

Further I worked across Australia to enhance our collective preparedness and response for biosecurity responses. I also interacted with other countries including the United States of America and The United Kingdom including months in the 2001 UK Foot and Mouth Disease Response as a senior manager.

Since retiring from the department, I have continued to actively work with Australian and overseas veterinarians working in wildlife health.

During my career working with veterinarians, it is clear to me that the number of veterinarians engaged in practice other than small animals (pets, cats, dogs etc) has steadily declined. This has been most notable in regional or rural areas.

### **2. The day-to-day needs**

Veterinarians clearly have role in the day-to-day management of animal health – wildlife, livestock and pets. This is more than just treating sick animal presented for treatment. Prevention and improvement in production are key roles that often go unrecognised – and less able to be costed or charged for by a veterinarian.

The modern veterinarian has a lead role in ensuring the welfare of all animals – as expected by the wider society and their immediate community. Welfare management is a key but less obvious responsibility of a veterinarian.

A good local veterinarian in a local community is more often than not a key leader in the community. Historically the local veterinarian has been a person to whom the looks up to for matters beyond just animal health. The local veterinarian through their interaction with land holders across their district is able to feel and gauge the needs of their community. Reflecting this role has often been the close association between the local doctor and the local veterinarian. The local veterinarian is a very important part of the fabric of the local community.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of the local veterinary practitioner, it is important to note the real need for specialist veterinarians such as epidemiologists and pathologists. Both take years to become qualified and build their necessary skills and experience. Nationally there have been reviews that have recognised the need for an increase in the numbers of these specialists. I have never had an adequate number of epidemiologists in any one of responses.

### **3. Emergency animal disease needs**

Many will put the case for an increased number of veterinarians that will be needed for an emergency response to an emergency animal disease. A number of national reviews in Australia have confirmed this need. My own experiences with emergency animal disease responses in NSW has been we were never able to achieve the optimum number of veterinarians in both field roles and also response management centre roles. During responses we sourced veterinarians from amongst those who had retired, interstate (beyond the national resource sharing arrangements) and even overseas – other than as per the national arrangements with like minded countries.

And the responses to date in NSW for animal health emergencies in NSW, such as those for Avian Influenza, Newcastle Disease and Horse Flu have been small compared to what will be needed for other diseases such as FMD and responses overseas. The NSW response to horse flu used hundreds of veterinarians compared to the many thousands used for FMD in the most recent FMD outbreaks in the UK.

There are just not enough veterinarians in NSW and even across Australia combined with those that could be accessed through our international arrangements to meet the needs of a medium to large scale response. It should be noted in the future as in the past, the premise that veterinarians from other states will be readily available is false in many regards. Even states that are not infected will need large numbers of veterinarians to ensure their state is free of and stays free of the disease.

A key role for local veterinarians is the early reporting / detection of an unusual sign of a disease or a suspect emergency animal disease. The local veterinarian is best placed to recognise something unusual is present / occurring either on a single holding or across their district. Further the same veterinarian through their training beyond treatment of animals is able to implement measures that will reduce the spread of the suspect disease and initiate actions to support the source of the disease. These are key actions that veterinarians implement as part of their normal business.

In the absence of a local veterinarian an unusual disease may go undetected and become widespread that in so doing affect the ability to control and eradicate an unwanted disease. Early detection works to reduce the scale of a response and the significant costs of a response.

This detection of an unusual disease extends to human health. The One Health approach across the human and animal health sectors recognises the potential for diseases to move between animals and humans. This applies to endemic zoonotic diseases as well as the more exotic / emergency diseases and those new diseases of the future. Veterinarians are a key link in this chain of managing the potential for the impact of animal borne diseases on humans.

### **4. Impacts and costs**

There are many descriptions of the significant costs for a response to an emergency animal disease – hundreds of millions for a medium to large scale response. Similarly, there are reports that detail the economic consequences of a medium to large scale outbreak of an emergency animal disease – including a new disease. The economic impact on the national economy for a medium to large scale for an emergency animal disease is described in the billions of dollars.

The economic impact on the affected livestock industries will be huge and have significant ripple impacts on those industries associated with the affected livestock industries – transporters, saleyards, machinery sales. The economic impacts on affected local communities will be huge – and the flow social impacts will see many communities unable to cope. Some reports describe the impact on a local community as >3x that of a severe drought.

The investment in recovery from the economic and social impacts will be many times greater than the response costs – as detailed by many reports. My own experience tells me that some land holders never recover and leave the livestock industries. The human impact of those in a local community and the thousands in a response has lasting mental health legacy. Oms never recover – I have had to deal with these instances first hand.

Beyond the economic and social impacts, there are other impacts. Environment impacts are commonly associated with medium and large-scale responses involving the destruction and disposal of thousands of animals. Communities will be overwhelmed with the response activities needed to control and eradicate the disease.

## **5. Funding**

Currently the funding model is primarily user pays for your local veterinarian. A local veterinarian remains local when there is sufficient income to maintain the financial viability of the local – with an adequate number of veterinarians. With changes in primary production e.g., larger farms, in house veterinarians for an enterprise, over the recent decades the number of local veterinarians has been steadily decreasing – despite increases in graduate numbers. A practice that employed double digits number of veterinarians in the 1970s is down to a very small number of veterinarians even though the local livestock numbers have increased.

No doubt the increasing number of disasters such as droughts and bushfires affecting livestock producing has also gradually eroded the ability of a producer to pay for a veterinarian. Interesting, this is set against a background where the local veterinarian is needed as part of the response for a disaster impact – e.g., animal welfare assessments and destruction. But who pays for the response assistance by the local veterinarian when the landholder is out of pocket?

For emergency animal disease responses there are well understood nationally agreed funding models – that get funding from the commonwealth, states / territories and affected industries. These funding models will pay the local veterinarian for their efforts during a response.

Similarly, there is government funding for surveillance by local veterinarians for specific diseases and exclusion of an emergency animal disease. This funding assumes there is a local veterinarian in place – and is not sufficient to sustain a local practice.

As for natural disasters where the majority of funding is for response and recovery and a very small amount given over to prevention (reference Productivity Commission Reports), there is a need for increased funding or supplementary funding to ensure the local veterinarian is present to ensure early detection of unwanted diseases and support control measures for such diseases, and ensure society expectations around animal welfare are being met. Recent history has shown the sustainability of the local veterinarian in adequate numbers across NSW cannot alone rely on revenue from the treatment and management of local livestock. There is an ongoing need for a critical mass of local veterinarians beyond those undertaking small animal work in NSW regional centres and across NSW.