

Submission
No 28

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

Name: Dr Gundula Rhoades

Date Received: 26 June 2023

Partially
Confidential

Submission to Parliament

Re: shortage of veterinarians in NSW

26.06.2023

My name is Dr Gundula Rhoades and I am the founder and owner of Gowrie Vet Clinic in Inverell, NSW.

My clinic is a 3.5 – 4 vet clinic with 5 daily nursing, reception and office staff as support. The clinic was founded and built by myself, whilst being the mother to three children. I founded the clinic on my then husband's cattle property, 25 km out of town, in 2002. In 2010, I moved the clinic into town, on a 5 acre block. I purpose- built a hospital, with a large clinic building for small animals, 23 paddocks for horses, holding yards, transport ramps, a horse stable and examination area, a mare crush where ultrasounds and rectal examinations can be performed, all surrounded by a rather large garden.

I became a single mother when my children were 2, 6 and 7 years old.

The first ten years in my clinic, I was on call every day and every night, as well as every weekend. As the clinic grew, and I gained more veterinarians, we could share the workload.

It has been hard. Being a country veterinarian is demanding and physically and mentally exhausting, and the monetary gain is not that much, for the expertise and investment that I, as well as many other vets, made.

We, as veterinarians, are mostly passionate, compassionate, animal loving people, which makes it harder to be in a commercial business, having to charge quite high sums of money for our services.

As long as I can remember, I had difficulty finding veterinarians to come and join me in the country.

Until 2019, I had 3 fulltime veterinarians plus myself. That meant that we had to do one in four nights on call, and one in four weekends. That was quite ok. However, one veterinarian left to go back to Sydney for personal reasons, another one had a terrible car accident while driving to a patient at night, leaving her unable to work for two years; one went on maternity leave. That left me to man the clinic by myself for nearly 12 months. All this time, I was advertising for a veterinarian (or two) in different locations: on Kookaburra, a veterinary employment website, on the AVA website, on Facebook and through Vetlink, a professional employment veterinary agency.

There were not even any applicants.

Might I also mention that my clinic is extraordinarily supportive and good to work for. I did many leadership courses, took part in team and personal development mastermind groups etc. My nursing staff are capable, friendly, supportive and fun. We are a young and enthusiastic, forward thinking team- and yet, not even any applications came through! Eventually, I burnt out. I lost a relationship I was in, because 'you never have time and the clinic always comes first.' My burn-out presented itself as me being pretty angry and not coping with the workload- although, after 32 years as a veterinarian, I am pretty tough and can do the work itself easily. But other pressures make the job very hard.

I cried a lot during this time- yet, still managed to keep my family and the clinic going.

At present, _____, veterinarian, is back from maternity leave, _____ is back from being injured, and I found one more veterinarian, _____, that used to be a student of mine, to join the team one day per week.

I am now 57 years of age and would like to work less.

I still need to find one more veterinarian though....

I am trying to find a succession for my clinic, to become a partner or to buy it off me, but so far the answer of the younger vets is that the pressures are too high and they 'don't want to end up like me'.

There is considerable investment in my clinic, plus the care for patients and for staff and their family- but if no one is interested in taking it on one day, I will have to close the doors. Apart from my personal story, my situation is very similar to other veterinarians.

I will list my perceived problems of the veterinary profession in dot points, to make it easier for you to read through this quickly.

1. **Vet Shortage:**

- Mainly females are now studying to become veterinarians
- Most women, when working as vets, will sooner or later start a family and then go half-time
- If that is the case, we need to DOUBLE the graduates
- The few males at university are often from overseas and go back to their country of origin
- The universities cannot supply enough veterinarians for Australia, yet 'sell' places to study as a business to overseas students. This is, plainly, wrong, when there are not enough veterinarians in this country.
- The attrition rate of vets is high. There are so many demands (skill, time, knowledge, after-hours work, difficult clients etc) that many veterinarians are choosing to leave the profession. (after only 5 years I heard?)
- Vet shortage is even higher in rural areas.
- Inverell is an attractive town with many facilities, yet I cannot find vets to come here. I don't even want to know how less appealing towns can attract young veterinarians.
- I have looked for 3 years to find another vet, without avail.

2. Financial pressure:

- Vet clinics are extremely expensive to run
- Profit margin is 5% if you are a good business- woman or -man; some clinics reach 10% (up to 20% in cities with good management skills), in rural areas, often the profit is zero.
- Modern and expensive equipment is needed to stay competitive. (For example, my new x-ray machine and developer cost \$80,000).
- Wages are high. Veterinarians, once you find one, want to get paid well. As they should. But that money has to be made from clients. We, as a profession, charge only a fraction for a service that human hospitals would. For example, plating a femur at a veterinary clinic will cost about \$2500-\$3500, whilst in a hospital caring for humans it would be ten times that much. Veterinarians have to pay for everything themselves: laboratory equipment,

ultrasounds, endoscopes, blood analyser, x-ray machines, surgical equipment, monitoring equipment etc.

- Clients can only pay so much for veterinary services
- The pressure of discussing charges is extremely difficult. We as veterinarians have to offer exceptional service for a fraction of the price that human hospitals charge.
- Staff are expensive. To care for animals, you often need two or three people to hold a dog or cat to insert a catheter: a human you can just tell to 'hold still', an animal will try to escape/bite/ scratch, so many nurses are needed.
- Financial pressure to make ends meet is hard

3. Fear of being sued:

- The fear of being sued is permanent and ever present
- We are supposed to be experts in many different areas, and we are constantly learning- yet the subject is vast. Skills are so diverse , too, much expertise is needed- but the fear of being sued when making a mistake can be crippling.
- The veterinary practitioners board , in my opinion, could be more supportive to us, yet, to all veterinarians I have talked to, is seen as the 'sword hanging over us ', threatening us with wrong-doing. Many young vets are too scared now to even try a new surgery for example, for the fear of being sued.

4. After hours work

- This is the worst part of being a vet. After hours call outs. It is exhausting , to be on call all the time.

While all of this sounds very negative, I, like most vets, love my job. There are many enjoyable aspects to it, and most of us would rather stay in the profession than leave. However, when pressure is too high and support is not available, too many vets give up.

Potential Solutions :

- Train more veterinarians
- Select more country based students that grew up on the land or around animals
- Train more male students: how can the veterinary industry be attractive for males again? And why is it not at the moment? Is it because of the low remuneration?
- Stop making us obliged to offer after hours care
- Help veterinary graduates to enter the workforce without a large student debt.
- Make universities free again- I am originally from Germany. Universities are free in Germany- it is well proven, that every dollar spent on higher education comes back to government as taxes paid ten times more ! Why punish people for getting an education? Germany and especially Scandinavian countries are good examples how societies improve in all aspects, when more money is spent on education.

- In Australia , public education needs to be improved to have more country kids being able to enter universities.
- Being able to study needs to be disconnected from being 'rich'.
- Help vet clinics financially. We provide a lot of services to the local community, including looking after wildlife and strays. This could be help in employing people or reducing tax. After 22 years in business, I know how hard it is to make a profit.

Thank you for reading my thoughts.

And thank you for putting this in front of parliament- just to be heard and have somebody think about our problem is wonderful. For three decades I have dealt with all these problems on my own, with no help from anywhere. If I wouldn't have had beautiful people like _____ who formed the UVG, or _____ and the Lincoln institute, I would have given up long ago.

I am proud of what I have achieved, and the growth that my staff have achieved through being in my clinic makes me proud, too. These young women, vets and nurses, are extraordinary, and I may dare to think that working in my clinic has given them so much education and more opportunities than they would have had without it. That makes me happy.

Being a vet is wonderful- but it is very demanding.

Any help from anywhere is welcome.

With warm regards

Dr Gundi Rhoades