

**Submission
No 51**

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

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VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NSW

Dear Honorable Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this forum. I hereby give consent for my details to be published. I am also happy to testify and bare witness, should this be required. I make this submission as an individual within my industry.

There are numerous factors contributing to the shortage of veterinarians in my opinion. They are listed below:

1) Stress and anxiety are rampant in our industry. The selection process in order to gain a place at veterinary school selects for highly intelligent, high achieving perfectionists. These individuals do not take failure lightly. We are generally highly empathic, caring people, focused on providing the best outcomes for our patients and clients. Patient death affects us adversely and we all (vets and nurses) dispense death on a daily basis. We are forced to offer euthanasia as a treatment option when our clients are unable to afford the recommended treatment. The stress and anxiety felt by those of us remaining in the profession is amplified significantly by the following:

- a) Vitriolic/angry clients that blame us for their inability to afford treatment
- b) Vitriolic/angry clients that refuse to pay their bills if the outcome for the patient is negative
- c) Aggressive media reports that portray our profession as purely focused on making money and greed
- d) Aggressive, derogatory and defamatory reviews left in public view in online platforms (Google reviews etc.), leaving us with little to no recourse
- e) The manner in which the Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW handles complaints. They behave very much in the manner of a kangaroo court. Complaints are dragged out over several months, if not years. This is totally unacceptable, unfair, inhumane and in my opinion, one of the major contributing factors to the high attrition rate suicide rate in our profession.

2) Foreign students: it is my understanding that a large percentage of each graduating year is made up of full fee-paying foreign students. This is all fair and well if those individuals wish to remain in Australia to practice. However, if they qualify and then leave the country, this accounts for a large brain drain. I feel somewhat hypocritical in saying this as I was a foreign student in Scotland, but I was required to leave the EU once I qualified. I chose to emigrate to Australia as this is where my family had moved to. As a matter of interest, I chose to study my veterinary degree in Scotland as it was significantly cheaper than Australia at the time (late 90's). I can also understand the Universities attraction to full fee-paying students – it generates significant revenue for them but does no good for the long term viability of the profession.

3) There is a large gender bias towards females in the profession (a 2016 study by the Australian Veterinary Association demonstrated that 80% of veterinary graduates are female). Let me be very clear: I have absolutely no issue with this at all. So long as you are good at what you do, I care not a jot what sex, race, creed etc. you may be. However, the fact remains that a large number of female graduates enter the workforce and then leave it to start families – again, totally understandable. Given the fact that 80% of veterinary graduates are female, this creates another deficit in our workforce.

4) Remuneration in the veterinary industry is woeful. Veterinarians earn significantly less than their peers in the human medical or dental world. I believe that this is one of the main reasons why there are less males than females in the profession. Please do not interpret this statement as sexist or misogynistic in anyway. It is merely a statement of opinion.

The following suggestions are my solutions to the problems:

1) I think that the Universities need to take a long hard look at their admission requirements. I believe that they should deviate away from students that have very high ATARs and focus more on grounded individuals with excellent people skills. Veterinary medicine is not rocket-science. Individuals need the capacity to assimilate vast amounts of information and learn pattern recognition. They do not need to be the smartest kids in the year.

2) I would like to see significant changes to the way in which the VPB of NSW operates. I believe that the Board should be comprised of at least 50% veterinarians and ALWAYS chaired by a vet. Leave the lawyers out of it. The complaints process needs to be streamlined and expedited. I believe that if members of the public wish to make a complaint against a veterinarian, they should have to pay a fee in order to lodge the complaint (say \$1000). If their complaint is upheld by the Board, then this fee is refunded to them. If not, it is retained by the Board. This will eliminate a significant amount of spurious and vexatious claims that some people make. In addition, I feel that the Board should force clients to pay compensation to veterinarians if their complaints are quashed. We lose a significant amount of clinical and personal time in preparing responses for the Board when complaints are made. All this is done in the name of upholding our reputation. The Board needs to publish a list of crimes and punishments, to provide us with some guidance as to the likely repercussions if we are found guilty of whatever it is we have been accused of. Most of us fear losing our jobs, livelihoods and clinics every time we face the Board. This contributes significantly to our negative mental wellbeing and quite frankly, is inhumane. There needs to be a time frame (statute of limitations) in which people can make claims and the time frame taken by the Board to come to a verdict needs to be significantly improved (the process from initial complaint to verdict should take no more than 4 weeks).

3) All Universities need to look at capping the number of foreign students. If not, then consideration should be given to requiring them to work rurally for several years before getting their full degree. This may help reduce the shortage temporarily, but it smacks of indebted servitude. An alternative would be to increase funding for veterinary schools to reduce their dependence on revenue generated by foreign students. However, this is easier said than done as everybody wants more funding.

4) Universities should consider taking equal numbers of male and female students (is this not equality after all?).

5) Maternity leave: Both woman returning to the industry and small business should be supported in this process. Small business owners are placed under enormous duress due to return to work laws. We are required to hold a staff members position for a year when they go on maternity leave. It is very costly to hold a position open for 12 months and fill it with a locum (if you can even get one). Equally, I understand that a woman returning to work would like some job security. In this regard, it would be helpful if the government would help fund the cost of a locum to cover the maternity leave vacancy. Failing this, they could consider giving the business a tax break to compensate for the lost revenue (reduced productivity due to the team member's absence or compensation to help pay for a locum).

6) Consider income tax cuts for veterinarians (to compensate for the large discrepancy between the average vet's earnings and their human peers). This could also be applied differentially (the vets that live in rural areas get more of a tax cut than those living in inner Sydney for example). However, this goes against free market principles and adds yet another cost to an already inefficient bureaucratic behemoth.

7) Consider providing some sort of regulatory body to clean up the Pet Insurance industry – pet insurance is one of the salvations of our industry. It allows us to provide our patients with the care that they require and makes it more affordable for our clients. I also think that educating people about the true cost of Medicare would go some ways to them understanding the costs involved in providing veterinary care. Sadly, most people over here do not appreciate how fortunate we actually are in terms of the medical care that we get, that we don't directly pay for.

In closing, I fear for our industry. I fear for our food security and I fear for our nation's animal welfare. The dwindling pool of veterinarians is going to be stretched thinner and thinner over time unless something changes drastically.

I will encourage my colleagues to contribute to this forum. Once again, thank you for the opportunity to contribute. Should you require any further assistance, please reach out to me.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Bruce Peter Krumm BSc BVMS MRCVS