

Submission  
No 78

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

**Organisation:** Name suppressed

**Date Received:** 12 July 2023

---

Partially  
Confidential

1. That Portfolio Committee 4 – Regional NSW inquire into and report on the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales, and in particular:

(a) the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry and pathology

\*\* The shortage of Vets is well known, with no short-term fix due to the long qualification process. However, the shortage is just as much to do with qualified vets choosing to leave the profession, as it is a lack of new entrants. There would appear to be a lack of ongoing support to help Vets that are struggling to remain in the industry, which would be a faster and cheaper option than training new ones. And to train more Vets, we need more teachers at University level to expand programmes and allow more entrants.

(b) the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates

\*\*This is a worsening problem. It can take up to a year to find a replacement vet, and often the choice is restricted to whoever is available and willing, rather than finding the correct experience level for the intended role. In the interim, there is more pressure on the remaining staff. Vets have become increasingly aware of their power, making their demands on everything from salary to work/life balance more difficult to fulfil. Unrealistic advertisements are increasingly appearing, which only lead to greater salary demands from existing staff. Retention is paramount, which places increasing pressure on Practice managers/owners to create a more positive work environment (not an unreasonable request.) However, the pace of salary demands is outpacing what can be passed on to customers, creating downward pressure on profit margins, becoming a self-fulfilling problem.

(c) the burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession

\*\*Again, well known, but no less of a problem for that. Individually, we know of Vets that are so burned out they are quitting jobs without any plan as to what to do next and needing a complete break before considering their next move. Often, we have to re-habilitate these Vets via part-time employment to gently rebuild their enthusiasm. Again, more support should be provided to avoid Vets getting to this point. Considering the amount of training required to become a Vet, the fact they are prepared to simply walk away from the profession is a poor indictment of our industry.

(d) the role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses

\*\*The shortage of Vets places more pressure on nurses. Some of this is good, as the better ones get opportunities to learn new skills. Otherwise, it creates a multitude of problems. Senior nursing staff are increasingly expected to train/mentor junior Vets, especially in the more specialised areas outside of routine cats and dogs. The disparity in pay is widening, as more of the budget goes toward Vet demands at the expense of nurses. Newer Vets also appear to be poorly trained as to the importance of their nursing staff and have a dismissive attitude, as well as considering menial tasks to be beneath them, which only adds to a nurse's workload. Vet nurses are the backbone of the industry and are poorly treated and remunerated for their efforts.

(e) the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians

\*\*I imagine this to be very similar to many other industries, rather than anything specific to the Veterinary industry. Many Vets working in a different country have been trained in a third country, which can help mitigate differences. Overall, it is the ability of the individual, and not the country of origin, that makes the difference.

(f) the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services

\*\*This was one of the first services we cancelled, due to the difficulties of providing it on a sustainable basis. Should a vet be called out overnight, we are likely to lose their services for the following day, disrupting schedules and any number of clients, for the benefit of one. Costing also becomes uneconomic, with a Practice unable to pass on all of the expenses of overtime/Out-of-hours pay rates. Lastly, as mentioned above with the changing power dynamic, many young vets simply refuse to do it. Specific to us, there is a local 24-hour emergency clinic, which we are happy to support by referring cases for overnight monitoring.

(g) the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians

\*\* The ease of importing an overseas Veterinarian is very helpful, but it is an extremely expensive and high-risk method of hiring someone. Otherwise, our main complaint would be the cost of the various regulatory and industry bodies that a Vet needs to comply with, after they have already built up a considerable debt just to qualify. Legislation that is allowing the likes of the RSPCA and local councils to shirk their responsibilities only adds to the workload for Vet practices. We are increasingly becoming animal “social workers.”

(h) the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

\*\*The challenge is that there is no quick fix, with education taking six years to produce a new Vet. Supply/demand dynamics also mean that even the worst Vet will walk straight into a job on graduation. This is against a backdrop where, if anything, pet ownership is increasing.

(i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations

\*\*Industry staff, both Vets and nurses, are extremely caring individuals with a love of animals, with most volunteering somewhere outside of their main job. They enjoy the variety of wildlife animals and always go the extra mile to help strays and homeless. However, this burden is growing, with councils and the RSPCA steadily retreating from their responsibilities. Shelters/rescue facilities are consequently overfull and underfunded, while also putting more pressure on those of us that are still prepared to offer heavily subsidised services. The cost of this public service is increasingly falling onto the shoulders (and wallets) of the practice owners, as it is a legal requirement to offer aid. As mentioned above, this is another problem against rising salary demands.

(j) the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others

\*\*Overall, the standard of animal welfare is still excellent, which reflects the skill and dedication of the people in the industry over and above the number of them. However, as cost pressures within the industry get passed onto customers, there are more incidences of “cost-constrained euthanasia,” which have a detrimental effect on the mental well-being of staff. A worsening economy has also created more “back-yard breeders,” which is neither good for the animal or the Vets. In general, clients are waiting until it’s absolutely necessary to bring in their pet, which often results it being in much worse condition – and suffering – than if they had brought it in sooner.

(k) current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations

\*\*We can only speak to lower income, not rural. In general, while of course everyone’s expenses have gone up significantly, the vast majority of clients are still able to pay, despite an increase in reluctance. However, as a practice, we have had to offer more of our regular clients instalment plans,

while also seeing an increase in the use of credit services. The bigger barrier remains the difficulty for clients to actually see a vet due to widespread staff shortages.

(l) strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practising veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

\*\* I can't speak for others, but we genuinely support work/life balance and treat all of our staff with respect and courtesy, especially via a stringent policy against abuse from clients. We even offer a complimentary mental health-line service, as it is extremely difficult to get appointment with psychologists etc. Anecdotally, we have heard rural gets get extremely poorly treated, resulting in them simply walking away. There is a massive difference among clients that view an animal as an asset rather than a pet.

(m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care (n) any other related matter

\*\*Worry less about "Veterinary care" and worry a lot more about "care of veterinarians!" Otherwise, the pace of Vets leaving the industry will only increase. The industry should be ashamed of the suicide rate among Vets, and seems to be doing very little to improve the conditions and attitudes that are causing it. There needs to be significant education of the general public as to the role of their vet, the training required to be one, and some of the immovable costs that go toward their bill. In addition, Vets need to be better educated and prepared for the challenges of the industry they are going into, as many seem ill-informed.