

Submission
No 80

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology

Date Received: 13 July 2023



12/7/2023

Dear Australian Veterinary Association,

The Australian Society of Veterinary Pathology (ASVP) is submitting the following report that has been put together by our training workshop group. This is a forensic analysis looking into the present and future requirements for veterinary pathologists in Australia, and the need for an ongoing expansion of training positions and support for the training of veterinary pathologists in Australia.

The estimates of projected requirements for future (and present) veterinary pathologists were based on a number of sources – the database of the ASVP membership, in depth discussions with every veterinary school/faculty in Australia, and every state and territory Department of Agriculture. Input from all major providers of commercial veterinary pathology services to the veterinary public was likewise sought and provided.

The important role that the veterinary pathologist plays in supporting the health of pets as well as the rural and commercial animal populations, supporting practicing veterinarians, training future veterinarians and engaging in Australian wide disease surveillance (to name a few areas) are touched on, and reasons for the present (and projected future) shortfall in trained veterinary pathologists is discussed.

As such this document represents the best realistic assessment of present and future need for an increased number of veterinary pathologists in Australia, and discusses ways this may be achieved.

I strongly commend this report to the enquiry, as does the entire ASVP committee.

Yours truly,

Allan Kessell

President of the ASVP

Australian Society Veterinary Pathology (ASVP)
National veterinary pathology training working group
Chair: Dr. Natalie Courtman

30 June 2023

Australian Veterinary Association
Senior Advocacy Officer
Attn: Liz Gemes

Dear AVA Advocacy (Liz Gemes),

Re: ASVP working group submission towards the AVA submission for NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into NSW Vet Shortage

The Australian Society for Veterinary Pathology (ASVP) national training working group was established in 2022 to support training to increase capacity and secure the future in veterinary pathology and related disciplines in Australia. We undertook a review of the national veterinary pathology workforce, in government, commercial and university sectors. The following findings and recommendations arose from that investigation.

Executive Summary

- A 70% increase in veterinary pathologists is required within 5-10 years in Australia to meet workforce demands.
- A 50% increase in pathology training positions is urgently needed to maintain veterinary pathology services in Australia.
- Urgent funding is required for a coordinated collaborative approach to pathology training in Australia

Responses to the relevant items of the Inquiry Terms of Reference:

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

The discipline of veterinary pathology is central to the accurate diagnosis of animal disease. It underpins Australia's preparedness for emergency animal disease, enables control of endemic disease, protects public health, supports biodiversity, and contributes to ensuring biosecurity.

A series of reviews conducted since 2000 have identified demographic trends among experienced veterinary pathologists such that serious gaps in service provision will increase within five years, and mentoring of trainee specialist veterinary pathologists will soon become difficult or impossible in Australia. The net result is that there are currently insufficient career paths to replace pathologists who are retiring and to maintain this essential discipline. The issues as they affect the livestock sector, aquaculture, biosecurity and wildlife - all of which support the Australian economy - are very similar.

In Australia veterinary pathologists are an essential element of the veterinary service in each state to quickly and accurately identify endemic, emerging and exotic/emergency animal diseases. Veterinary bacteriologists, virologists, parasitologists, toxicologists and serologists are also required. However, pathologists are the essential corner-stone.

Within New South Wales, the Plant and Animal Health Laboratory at Menangle within the Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute (EMAI) remains the only government veterinary laboratory in the state. Once, there were many regional vet laboratories that serviced rural vets and producers, however Armidale and Wagga Wagga labs were closed in 1996, and despite appeals to the then NSW Minister for Primary Industries, Ian Macdonald, the Orange and Wollongbar labs were also closed in 2009. As a result, the EMAI lab services the whole of NSW and detects and responds to every emergency animal disease event.

The NSW EMAI laboratory is able to achieve preliminary results for emergency diseases, such as Foot and Mouth Disease, days earlier than the national laboratory, thus saving precious time in an outbreak event, directly leading to reduced financial loss and a faster recovery. Building and maintaining the veterinary expertise and surge capacity of the EMAI labs is essential for the productivity and protection of NSW primary industries. In 2017, a restructure of EMAI lab resulted in the loss of 5 of 8 experienced veterinary pathologists, risking catastrophic failure of NSW's emergency surge capacity. Since these disruptions, EMAI vet labs (and other state labs) have struggled to recruit mid or late career pathologists into vacant roles. EMAI lab is embarking on in-house training, at great personal and financial cost for the employed vets.

Veterinary pathologists are a support profession for NSW veterinarians, particularly for solo, remote and rural vets. A phone call to a pathologist while in the field, facing a difficult and sometimes dangerous situation, can educate, comfort and reassure the solo vet. The maintenance of the veterinary pathologist specialty is essential for mental health and retention of vets in regional NSW. Likewise, the veterinary pathologist supports the livestock industries, by underpinning and informing their local veterinarians.

The Australia-wide veterinary pathology active workforce has contracted from 140 FTE in 2007 to 112 FTE in 2023 despite a growth in demand for pathology diagnostic services over this period. This contracture largely reflects retirement as 50% of the workforce in 2007 were over 50 years of age, and a lack of sufficient training positions over this period. In addition over the past 5 years there has been a rise in remote digital pathology services in private laboratories which has drawn pathologists away from University and Government positions.

The current Australian workforce includes 25 in Universities, 51 in private diagnostic laboratories and 36 in Government. All sectors report significant difficulties in recruiting suitably trained and qualified pathologists, resulting in many persistent vacancies in both anatomic pathology and clinical pathology across all sectors. Some positions have been vacant for a year or more.

This is creating bottlenecks in diagnostic work, reducing the number of training opportunities, reducing research and increasing workload staff stress on current staff. There is broad concern regarding the surge capacity of the profession to adequately respond to emergency animal diseases in the future and to continue to meet the diagnostic demands of the veterinary profession.

Current conservative 10-year projections indicate an additional requirement of 60 FTE veterinary pathologists to meet growing demand and replace retiring pathologists. Based on current and projected training capacity there will be a further shortage of at least 26 FTE in 10 years, with the impact of this shortage further exacerbated by an increasing demand for part-time work in the profession.

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

The greatest challenge to maintaining a sustainable veterinary pathology workforce is the lack of sufficient training opportunities across all states of Australia to match attrition.

A veterinary pathologist must complete undergraduate veterinary training (5-6 years of university) then continue through a 3-4 year training program at a university, commercial or government institute to qualify by examination. This is a significant commitment for individuals, who accumulate substantial education fees whilst paid

low salaries over this period. In many cases, long term salary growth is inadequate to attract students and veterinarians to the specialty.

There are currently 3-4 anatomic pathology and 0 clinical pathology training positions across Universities, 0-1 anatomic pathology and 0-1 clinical pathology training position in private laboratories, and 2 anatomic pathology training positions in Government laboratories across Australia, with some of these programs training to entry level rather than specialist level.

The **lack of training programs** reflects a number of factors, including insufficient suitable supervisors in the institution, lack of funding for training positions, and the current high workload of existing veterinary pathologists which does not allow time for training.

There are multiple factors leading to a lack of suitable supervisors across the sector. Specialist training programs require a minimum of two specialist level supervisors in the discipline i.e. in anatomic or clinical pathology and a broad caseload. Australian Universities are finding it **increasingly difficult to attract and retain specialists across all veterinary disciplines including pathology** due to lower salaries than private industry, and reduced academic job satisfaction associated with high undergraduate teaching loads and reduced research time. In addition the Universities currently offering pathology training are reporting significantly reduced pathology caseload due to reduced University hospital caseload and reduced diagnostic capacity necessitating outsourcing of pathology services. Government laboratories are often understaffed as salaries are lower than private laboratories and thus current staff do not have capacity to support training, and there is a lack of Government funding for training positions. Private laboratories report difficulties in recruiting clinical pathologists due to workforce shortage, and whilst they have a large varied caseload of biopsy samples for anatomic pathology training they do not offer post-mortem training which is an essential part of anatomic pathology training.

The major factors influencing retention are an **ageing profession, workload and salaries**. Reports into the veterinary pathology field in Australia (see References below) have stated "50% of experienced specialist staff will retire in 5 years", calling for a national response to address this existential threat. Veterinarians in Australia will not be able to fulfill their responsibilities without adequate laboratory support, much of which relies on the veterinary pathology specialty. Since these reports were completed, the veterinary pathology field has become fraught with overwork, ineffectual recruitment attempts and inadequate pools of talent to draw from. Many training programs have been discontinued or downsized due to funding cuts or insufficient professionals to run them, therefore exacerbating the problem.

Adequate salary growth is another consideration affecting the veterinary pathology workforce, with Australian positions falling behind potential earnings that can be obtained overseas (e.g. USA), creating a disincentive to stay and work in Australia. Increased salaries for veterinary pathologists in universities and government will assist in attracting and retaining talent.

Future projections suggest numbers of training positions need to increase by >50% to maintain continued veterinary pathology services in Australia. Currently, due to the shortfalls in local training opportunities, veterinarians with an interest in becoming pathologists have sought training overseas and often continue to work overseas, or have moved into other areas of the veterinary industry.

Our review suggests there needs to be 70% increase in veterinary pathologists within 5-10 years in Australia to meet university and government workforce demands. This projection is likely be a conservative estimate, due to some future positions being part time and normal attrition of pathologists through resignations and retirement.

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

Ongoing workforce shortages and financial pressures across the University and government sectors have resulted in **increased workload stress** for veterinary pathologists, similar to other veterinary professionals. Emergency disease outbreaks such as Equine Influenza, Hendravirus, Japanese Encephalitis have placed the Government workforce under increased stress and highlighted a lack of surge capacity in the profession.

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

Enticing talent from overseas has been challenging due to salary and cost of living comparisons. Increasing government and university **salary growth** may provide a more competitive landscape to attract qualified veterinarians.

Australia has a rich pathology history with many endemic diseases unique to this country. As such, a veterinarian from overseas still requires a period of training to gain local knowledge for Australia's unique conditions.

(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

The ASVP national training working group identified the following **training support needs**

- Financial support for training positions, student externships, conferences

- Financial support to expand ancillary tests to increase the breadth of caseload in training institutions
- Financial support for a collaborative approach to training to allow:
 - An active website for coordination of training and shared resources
 - Organisation of externships in wildlife, lab animal, toxicology, equine and production animal across the sector
 - Provision of online multi-institution rounds
 - Provision of online multi-institution journal clubs (anatomic and clinical pathology)
 - Regular MANZCVS and ACVP/ECVP mock exams
 - Shared training resources and sessions
 - Networking and support of pathology trainees

Recommendations:

To achieve the above support for collaborative training **urgent funding is required** for

1. Pathology training scholarships to support Government and Universities training places to increase training capacity by 50%
2. Grants for funding costs associated with externships for all trainees
3. Development of the collaborative training website and resources
4. A pathology training coordinator to support the website, resources and development of externship opportunities

A review into NSW Department of Primary Industries **government vet workforce** has contributed towards the following recommendations

1. Adequate succession planning for identified areas of expertise (veterinary pathology)
2. Ongoing employment for additional specialist training roles to encourage accumulation of local knowledge and NSW-centric expertise
3. competitive salaries and relevant progression criteria for government diagnostic laboratory veterinarians

For further inquiries, please contact the ASVP national training working group Chair,
Dr. Natalie Courtman

Report collated by Drs Natalie Courtman and Zoe Spiers, 30 June 2023 on behalf of
working group.

References:

Current status of pathology training and workforce in Australia, ASVP national training
working group 2022,

Supply of Australian Livestock Pathologists, Rothwell, Walker & Ross, 2019,

A Discussion paper by AHA in January 2011 'A Strategy to a national Animal Health
Laboratory System' lists the following reports:

National Review of Australian Animal Health Laboratories, Carrol 1998;

Review of Rural Veterinary Services, Frawley 2003;

Report of the Frawley Steering committee on Utilisation of Laboratory Service, Sims
2005;

Review of Australia's Quarantine and Biosecurity arrangements, Beale, 2008

The Australian Animal Disease Diagnosis Training Initiative, AHA, 2007;

Veterinary Pathology Workshop, National training needs and Mechanism, hosted by
AHA and Sydney University Feb 2007.