

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Kookaburra Veterinary Employment

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Veterinary Workforce Shortage Enquiry

Submission from Wendy Nathan, Director, Kookaburra Veterinary Employment. 14th July 2023

Kookaburra Veterinary Employment is a specialist employment agency and online advertising service for the whole veterinary industry, covering Veterinarians, Vet Nurses, Vet Technicians, and all the support staff involved in the veterinary profession, in all levels of the industry from general practice, referral practice and emergency centres to industry, government, and university. Kookaburra Veterinary Employment was established in Australia in December 1998, and also operates in New Zealand, the wider Asia Pacific region, Middle East, United Kingdom, Ireland, and Canada. One of the Directors, Wendy Nathan BVMS MRCVS, is a veterinarian who graduated from Glasgow University in 1994.

This submission is to provide information and statistics collected by Kookaburra Veterinary Employment, who is a major specialist veterinary employment agency, and the largest in Australia, in order to inform the NSW Veterinary Workforce Shortage Enquiry, as well as providing our opinion on those parts of this enquiry for which our expertise has direct relevance.

1. Shortage of Veterinarians

Kookaburra Vets periodically analyses the data collected for veterinary job listings with Kookaburra in Australia. Please see the May 2023 article "*Update on the Vet Shortage*"

2. Challenges – recruitment and retention of vets

A lot of the challenges regarding retention of vets relate to pay rates and mental health. Kookaburra Vets completed a survey of veterinarians in Australia in both 2019 and 2022 (see attachments), including questions on pay rates, happiness, and future plans. In 2022, 46% of respondents said they would prefer to be paid more. 42% felt their current rate was fair. (*Kookaburra Salary Survey: Survey Results 2022: 19, What do you think you should be paid for this job?*)

Social media veterinary groups ([Australian Veterinarian Network](#), and [Veterinary Employment and Locum Network](#)) have frequent discussions on pay rates in conjunction with costs to clients (animal owners).

26% of vets (63 vets) who responded to the Kookaburra Vets Salary Survey 2022 said they were planning on leaving general practice by 5 years' time, either retiring, leaving the profession entirely, taking a break, or moving into another area of the veterinary industry.

In the 2019 survey, 24% of responding vets (142 vets) were planning on leaving general practice by 5 years' time.

Please see the Kookaburra Salary Surveys: *Survey Results 2022: 16. Where do you anticipate being in 5 year's time* and *Salary Survey 2019 Part 4*.

Recruitment of Vets will continue to be a problem if the absolute number of vets does not increase. Vacancy rates have increased more than 4-fold in the last 9 years. There is no pool of unemployed vets in Australia, hence for every job filled, another becomes vacant. To see a visual representation of jobs available in Australia, Kookaburra plots jobs on a map in the **Kookaburra Jobs** app – available on the App Store at <https://apple.co/3AQzykl>

3. Mental Health Challenges

Many of the practice owners and managers that we talk to on a daily basis are highly stressed by the workforce shortage, and many are also resigned to having great difficulty hiring suitable new staff.

4. Overseas trained vets

Overseas trained vets with a veterinary degree immediately eligible for recognition and registration with the Veterinary Boards in Australia have a vital role in the Australian veterinary industry, provided they are able to get a Work Visa. COVID restrictions halted this source of vets and brought more pressure to bear on an industry already experiencing shortages. Overseas vets who enter Australia with Working Holiday Visas are particularly important as locums.

Overseas trained vets who are required to sit the AVE (Australasian Veterinary Exam) prior to registration in Australia have a double challenge of being required to do workplace training under supervision prior to the exam, and yet without easy access to work visas. Hosting and employing an overseas trained vet prior to them passing the AVE puts an additional financial burden on to a veterinary practice, and paradoxically compounds the veterinary shortage by requiring constant supervision.

Our opinion is that the following things are of importance:

- Vets must continue to be on the Skilled Occupation List
- Reduced processing time and red tape for Visa applications and Employer sponsorship
- Removing the requirement for 482 Visa applicants to have 2 years' work experience in order to open eligibility to new graduates, on the grounds that veterinary graduates have clinical experience during their final years of study
- Reduce the TSMIT – this has been increased to AUD70,000 for Nomination applications lodged on, and after 1 July 2023, which in view of the market salaries and Award rates for veterinarians, could exclude any vet with under 2 years' experience.

If NSW is to consider State sponsorship of vets for rural, regional and remote areas then the points above must also be addressed.

5. Rural, regional, remote NSW in particular – shortages & challenges

Kookaburra Vet Employment has noted that it is always more difficult to attract vets to rural, regional and remote locations. This has been the case ever since 1998 when we were founded. Disadvantages of regional / rural / remote practices include:

- More sole charge work (single vet)
- Smaller practices (less vets compared to cities) & consequently less support from colleagues
- Lower wages
- More mixed practice (less vets seek mixed practice work than 100% companion animal)
- More on call and after hours work, often not fairly compensated
- Reduced access to continuing education opportunities

In addition, the same challenges apply as for multiple other professions in attracting people to live and work in rural and regional areas.

The Kookaburra Veterinary Employment survey of Australian Vets from 2019 had sufficient respondents to be able to group some responses by location - by State, and also by location category – Capital City, Other Urban, Regional High Urbanisation, Regional Low Urbanisation, and rural. **Pay rates were lowest in regional areas.** (see *'Survey Results 2019 part 1: 11. and 12. '*)

Our opinion is that the following suggestion has merit

- HECs debt forgiveness or support in some way for veterinarians prepared to commit to at least 2 years in regional, rural or remote practice.