

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

This issue of inadequate and declining veterinary practice services, particularly in rural communities, has been recognised as an ongoing global trend for over 2 decades. The Australian university sector responded intensely to this after the UK FMD epidemic of 2001, when it was realised that this shortage created enormous vulnerabilities for the Australian economy. This vulnerability has only increased, as evidence by the entry of FMD & Lumpy Skin Disease to Indonesia in 2022. The ongoing financial pressures in the university sector has led to loss of momentum in the rural focus and perhaps a revisit to the training issues is required.

Whilst the efforts in training were significant but have been diminishing, the creation of the CSU rural veterinary school at Wagga, increased recruitment of livestock expertise at USYD and elsewhere, with a rural entry scheme allowing a 5 points lower ATAR for bona-fide rural students at USYD, both the selection of students and improved animal handling and livestock experiences in the curriculum was achieved for an extended period. It is certainly of relevance to promotion of a rural focus in new vet graduates, although vet schools are there to train veterinary scientists capable of working in the whole range of employment opportunities, from urban and rural practices to veterinary public health in international food security and one health research and practice etc, a reality that is often unappreciated by practitioners. Whilst many students declare their interests in rural and rural-mixed practice from their exposure to livestock training, services, farms, research and of course rural & overseas placements in their degrees, the competition for jobs outside of practice mean that many graduates make life-style choices that avoid the excessive demands of vet practice.

However, the issue of student selection and training, including the gender of students, is not the main issue when it comes to retention of graduates in rural communities.

The major concern is the disturbing decline in quality of services available in so many rural localities (other than the major growth centres eg Wagga) and communities, with inadequate educational, medical & other services & low alternative employment opportunities (e.g. for partners). This decline is combined with a slow adaption of rural practices to the services that are really required by the better farm businesses, resulting in many rural practices having migrated to increasing dependence on services to companion animals. This means many newer graduates never become adept at servicing rural clients in a sustainable way. Further, the increasing expectations of newer graduates for a quality of life, involving a different work-life balance than previous generations experienced on graduation, plus the stresses of a social-media condemnation where any error is punished publicly, makes a long-term job in vet practice a much less attractive proposition than it once was.

Whilst most effort has been directed at vet school entry and curricula, resulting in establishment of the CSU model and numerous 'livestock-focused' initiatives at USYD & elsewhere, none of these initiatives have solved the problem. The solutions are likely to reside in the recognition that the changes above are the present and future and we will need to increasing the numbers of trained vets to adapt to the high turnover in vet practice, unless a more sustainable model of vet practice is provided. A decade ago, USYD had a Rural Focus Group that visited many smaller NSW rural communities struggling to find a pathway for the now increasingly older professionals having to finally retire from their dentistry, law, vet etc practices, with no-one interested in taking it on. We sent our students there but so few stayed. None of the towns had medical Drs. The USYD solution was the Dubbo Rural Medical Campus to train GP Drs 'in the country for the country'. However had this fixed the rural Dr shortage? No, the problem persists, although is somewhat relieved in some areas by increasing no's of international Drs. This may seem like a relatively simple solution although it hasn't worked as well for rural vet practice, with many overseas graduates unable to achieve state registration standards.

Some solutions are more likely to be found in more holistic efforts to improve rural community services to attract younger vets to smaller towns. However, an increased focus on tailoring the services the vet profession really should be providing to rural clients, needs greater recognition. The issue is so often directed at vet schools by those who don't understand that universities simply cannot train the new graduates to provide day 1 competency levels of service in 'livestock health, production and welfare rural practice' that clients from modern rural livestock enterprises require. This has to come from mentoring by leading mid-career vets with vast experience and expertise, increasingly offering career pathways for younger vets with a remuneration offer that will retain them in challenging jobs in often remote rural areas. Final year placements with practitioner is part of the process, despite the sad complaints from some that this an abrogation of university training responsibility.

One solution that will be unpopular in some practitioner groups, is the argument that there is an increasingly strong case that veterinary public practice model, such as the NSW LLS, will become the most sustainable way of ensuring we have adequate numbers of rural veterinarians. The NSW LLS provides a high level the disease surveillance and response capacity that is the envy of other states and countries, directly support our rural industries with R&D, regular and extension. It has proven to be a sustainable model of service delivery for rural industries and consideration for a similar mechanism in other states should be promoted,