

**Submission
No 87**

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: OurVet-Petstock Vet

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As General Manager, I make this submission on behalf of OurVet/Petstock Vet.

OurVet/Petstock Vet is national network of 58 general practices in Australia that employs 220 veterinarians (95 of which are in NSW). As a result, we are acutely aware of the challenges currently facing the veterinary industry in this country. And personally, as a practicing veterinarian of 33 years, I share the deep concerns of my colleagues about the state of our profession.

There are three priority issues facing the veterinary industry. Each has its' own detrimental implications that need to be understood and addressed.

- **Shortage of veterinary practitioners relative to increased demand**
- **Staff recruitment and retention**
- **Mental health**

Shortage of veterinary practitioners

There is an undeniable shortage of qualified veterinary professionals in, or looking for, employment. The number of job vacancies for clinicians is at an unprecedented and all-time high.

According to the 2021 AVA work-force survey;

- 77% of respondents reported the clinic they currently worked in had advertised for a vet vacancy in the previous 12 months
- Concerningly, 30% of vacancies took more than 12 months to fill or were still not filled

This circumstance did not happen overnight. A chronic shortage of vets has existed for years and gone unaddressed. COVID did not cause the deficiency, it accelerated an already predictable resource shortage relative to demand. Now we are at crisis point.

69% of Australian households now own at least one companion pet, compared to 61% in 2019.

At June 2022 the Veterinary Board of NSW reported 4,396 registered vets +4.9% vs 2021. A modest increase, however insufficient to keep pace with amplified demand.

As a consequence, companion pet owners are experiencing delays and frustration accessing veterinary services in regions worst affected, especially animals that require time-sensitive care.

Staff recruitment and retention

A shallow pool of candidates can have both positive and negative repercussions.

- ❖ Positive potential
 - Prospective and current employers may need to “lift their game” in terms of pay and conditions to attract and retain veterinary team
- ❖ Negative implication
 - The sparsity of applicants has forced some employers to compromise their standards of selection. Out of desperation, applicants with “a degree and a pulse” may prevail. In a contrasting landscape, where multiple candidates apply for a vacancy, competition inherently drives a higher standard of applicant. This can only be good for the profession, pet and pet owner alike.
 - Locum work-force.....the percentage of registered veterinarians in NSW that have elected to be casual or a contractor is at an all-time high. The flexibility of the “locum-life” has always appealed to a segment of the veterinary profession and been

highly appreciated when permanent team need a break. Traditionally locums charged rates that fairly reflected the trade-off between a higher rate of pay versus permanent benefits (like permanency of employment, annual leave, sick leave, long-service, etc) Relative to this, contractor rates were equitable.

But the current landscape has incentivized veterinary professionals to leave permanent employment in exchange for inflated rates of pay with diminished accountability in terms of work product.

Locum vets are essential to the sustainability of the profession. However a balance is imperative. A profession that is skewed to a contractor-based work-force simply cannot maintain standards of care and continuity of client relationships.

- Cost to pet owner.....noting there is no magical bucket of money to subsidize higher wages and a greater (and more expensive) locum work-force, cost of care needs to be passed on to the consumer. In addition to current cost-of-living pressures, pet owners may find best-care options even more prohibitive than before.

Mental health

The industry-specific mental health challenges that veterinary teams face has been widely researched, documented and discussed. Psychosocial risk factors escalated under COVID and now cost of living stressors as well as delays in accessing veterinary services has resulted increasing incidents of customer frustration and aggression. More than ever, vets need strategies for self-care, resilience and maintaining a positive mind-set to thrive.

But access to quality mental health support and an EAP will only go some of the way to mitigating burn-out. The veterinary work-force shortage means existing vets are under pressure to do more to meet patient and client needs. Work-flow efficiencies, technology and clinic culture can help make this sustainable in the short term, but ultimately burnout will take casualties. There are not enough new vets entering the work-force, the profession desperately needs to hold on to those it already has.

Solving the veterinary work-force crisis

What are the options?

- Graduate more vets.....it's a medium to long-term solution, but the sooner we increase DVM intakes the sooner the profession will benefit from through-put
- Could re-structuring of the veterinary degree provide an expedited qualification for those interested only in a narrow stream of practice. For example, institutions might offer a companion animal degree that offers registration to treat only dogs, cats and exotic animals. Sans the large animal and food production curriculum, DVM students could achieve qualification in a shorter time-frame.
- Attract vets from overseas, especially those with a recognized qualification for immediate registration. Noting the veterinary work-force shortage is a global issue, Australia has the advantage of being a desirable place to live. A number of vet clinics and veterinary networks are exploring overseas recruitment as individuals. Perhaps there needs to be a more unified approach with a sophisticated campaign orchestrated with the help of government to promote and incentivize expatriation of international applicants? For example Government might consider tax

exemptions/buffers for international migrants, especially from US where student loans disproportionately high to salary.

- Incentivise vets to return to the profession after parental leave. The veterinary profession is a heavily feminized work-force and many will choose to start a family. Employers are endeavoring to create flexible work conditions that help overcome some of the barriers faced for those parenting young children and considering returning to veterinary practice. Perhaps the government could provide additional assistance with improved access to child care, subsidization- and other support.
- Review of university selection criteria. Could traits like fortitude and resilience be explored in addition to academic aptitude when selecting applicants for a veterinary degree? Might this improve retention in the profession and diminish disillusionment and burnout churn?
- Review the percentage intake of international students into DVM. And what proportion of these remain in Australia after graduation and go on to practice here. If the prior is substantial and the latter is low, a review might be indicated. Noting that universities rely on higher up-front income from international students, Government support of institutions to reduce international intake in favour of local applicants could be necessary to achieve this.
- It may be worth investigating the gender disparity in the veterinary work-force. An understanding of why the imbalance exists as well as its' impact on professional availability and retention might present additional scope for future planning. Of particular interest might be the percentage of males and females still in practice after 5 and 10 years. As well as an understanding of why fewer males aspire to be a vet than females.
- In a similar way that it incentivizes human doctors to practice regionally, Government might consider subsidizing veterinary salaries and/or providing HECS debt relief.
- Government funded hospitals and/or a subsidy for veterinary treatment for low income earners would allow pet owners to access quality pet services that would otherwise be prohibitive. This might also alleviate some of the stressors that drive veterinarians to leave the profession.
- There is an obvious opportunity for veterinary nurses to contribute more to the delivery of veterinary services and diminish the load on veterinarians, thereby allowing for greater work-flow efficiency and capacity. Provided there is rigour around qualification (such as Vet Tech in USA) and mandatory registration (such as AVNAT) to ensure quality-control, non-doctor support team could be leveraged to perform a range of professional services that currently burden doctors.
- To the previous point, Veterinary Boards will need to recognize more advanced non-doctor competency and re-define acceptable guidelines for "acts of veterinary science". And as this currently varies state board to state board, a national governing Board with consistent rules applicable to all states is desirable.
- Owner education on the benefits of pet insurance currently sits with the veterinary profession and insurance providers. It is estimated that only 7% of Australian pets are insured against accident and illness. The balance are likely to experience prohibitive financial duress if something unexpected happens to their pet. A government-driven campaign to raise awareness amongst pet owners and promote the benefits insurance could increase rates of coverage. More insured pets means veterinary clinics can charge fees commensurate with the service they deliver. Which

means veterinary nurses and veterinarians can be remunerated appropriately. And pet owners will receive optimal quality care without financial constraints or duress.