

**Submission  
No 88**

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

**Name:** Dr Anthony James

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# Parliamentary inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

## 1. Introduction

I read about this enquiry via this news article (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-15/veterinarian-shortage-parliamentary-inquiry-w/102476808>).

I have worked in NSW and now work in Victoria in remote regional Victoria i.e., the Wimmera Mallee region, located 4 to 5 hours northwest of Melbourne. The region is known for its extensive sheep industries, particularly fat lamb production but wool also figures within the region to a lesser extent. I am a sole trader and owner of my single veterinary surgeon practice in Warracknabeal, Victoria. I consider myself a mixed practice but now because of my age and well-being, I limit my large animal work to sheep medicine, farm management, some types of equine work (e.g., official veterinarian at harness racing events) and companion animals.

One hundred kms north of me is a veterinary clinic in Swan Hill, one hundred and sixty kms west of me is Bordertown's veterinary clinic, one hundred kms east of me is St Arnaud's veterinary clinic, one hundred kms southeast of me is Stawell's veterinary clinic and not too much further east is Ararat's veterinary clinic and finally sixty kms south of me is two veterinary clinics in Horsham.

So, it is fair to say the radius of the area I service is approximately 100 kms and therefore the area of my coverage is 31,400 sq. kms. I graduated in 1977 from Melbourne University and **I am almost 70 and I am tired of it all**. Yet I cannot get a graduate veterinarian to work with me. At one point I advertised for over a year and received no suitable replies (and this dilemma was exacerbated by also trying to get a veterinary nurse), all to no avail.

### Local Veterinary Practice

The two practices in Horsham do not do large animal work at all, despite being in a rural area. Their focus is on companion animals only. One practice was purchased by a "corporate" and to date has given no indication offering farm services, the other clinic is still owned by a sole trader who wants to expand into large animal work but cannot get a graduate to join their multi-vet practice. My colleague in St Arnaud (single veterinarian practice) has been so overworked that they have taken stock of their well-being and reconfigured their business model to focus on large animals as there is sufficient focus on companion animals in the region. My colleagues in Ararat are a traditional multi-veterinarian mixed practice. I am not as familiar with the business operations of the other clinics mentioned in my introduction.

So, this region of 31,400 sq. kms is reliant on two sole traders (the St Arnaud veterinary surgeon and myself) to do sheep work, cattle work, farm management and equine work and I see this as symptomatic of what ails the veterinary profession in all the rural areas of Australia and hence, I feel justified in making this submission.

## 2. Problems

**Pay and Conditions** – the **Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award [MA000118]** is a killer for a sole practitioner trying to make a living while servicing an industry that can't afford the real costs of veterinary services.

**Lack of Government Assistance** – as an example of this problem I will illustrate by using a personal example of the problem, namely my attempt to get an experienced veterinary nurse from overseas. It has so far cost me approximately \$20,000 to get the nurse onto a 482 visa with the attempt (still in

progress) to get her onto a 491 visa and still the nurse has no surety of residency after her 5-year tenure with me in regional Victoria expires (i.e., if she stays on the 482 visa and if the 491 visa is not approved).

Therefore, how can one attract qualified overseas professionals if we have nothing to offer them but hard work, terrible conditions, and poor pay? The governments of both political persuasions and federal and state governments “walk the walk” in saying they help small businesses, but when push comes to shove, they never “talk the talk”. Small business is hung out to dry because they have no political influence while multinationals and big corporations (thinking banks here, where rural closures occur in the blink of the eye with no political push-back!) seem to get a free ride. Taking this further the new salary base that must be offered for an overseas professional on a 482 and 491 visa has risen from \$55,000 to approximately \$75,000 per year. I would be lucky to earn \$75,000 per year as the owner of the practice, since my demographic is largely farmers, pensioners (elderly) and social welfare recipients. Hence my services are nothing like city prices for the same services. Where was government logic (and assistance) when this decision was made?

### **University Training**

Universities are now for-profit businesses and see students as commodities in which they trade their “bums on seats” for either government or private (self-funded) dollars. It is a Faustian pack between governments with their demonization of tertiary education and corporatized universities with their vice-chancellors on six-figure salaries, that ensures minimum training (i.e., minimum costs) for maximum profit. Hence the graduates come out with huge debts and huge expectations and don’t see a future practicing the lowly and dirty traditional skill sets of rural veterinary practice.

Veterinary science has its roots firmly in blacksmithing and the role of the horse as the war machine and industrial workhorse (no pun intended) for millennia stretching from the horse’s first domestication to its demise, as an economic cornerstone, starting with the nascent industrial age. Furthermore during this period of equine primacy, veterinary education started with Claude Bourgelat and his attempt to eradicate Rinderpest from French cattle herds. Contemporary trained veterinarians have no knowledge of their foundational roots and instead pretend to be “mini-doctors” running around in scrub tops with pet food company logos on the sleeves (surely a conflict of interest), watching cutting edge work in universities (which while underfunded by governments) have cutting edge machines that go “ping” (thanks to funding from “student commodity units” and corporate interests). And to what value is this to the rural community?

Furthermore, one must ask, why does one need a bachelor degree or higher to get into veterinary medicine and why does a veterinary surgeon need to be a post-graduate Doctor of Veterinary Medicine? After nearly 50 years I have discovered veterinary science is not “rocket science” and what we don’t need is veterinary science graduates who can’t think without the aid of an ultrasound, MRIs, and CT scans (usually all done on the one patient).

### **Veterinary Boards & TGA Scheduling**

These are not professional standards boards but consumer advocate boards. They do nothing to maintain veterinary standards but take every petty complaint from any gadfly and make the life of a sincere and honest veterinary surgeon a living hell. The slightest complaint sees these boards side with the consumer and tie the veterinarian down with mindless questions and reams of paper in response. Furthermore, TGA scheduling on drugs makes it hard for veterinarians to offer services to farmers in remote areas at reasonable costs. I concentrate solely on bona fide clients but trying to stay within the requirements of the definition of bona fide client and continue to service these clients stretches

my capabilities to the limit resulting in me working weekends to just see my farm clients either six monthly or annually.

### **3. Suggestions**

#### **Pay and Conditions**

I am conflicted. I can't even afford the Award rates but at the same time the Award rates are a disgrace for both veterinarians and nurses.

#### **Lack of Government Assistance**

It is easy to blame governments for our woes, after all being a business owner places me in small group of privileged individuals within our broader society and especially within my local community, but there is no consideration for exemptions from unrealistic or unachievable government guidelines, requirements or rules that apply across the board irrespective of local circumstances. Exemptions and/or funding (or other material support) for disadvantaged and/or remote rural areas for essential services (e.g., veterinary services) must be considered i.e., "one size does not fit all". This could be exemptions from the \$75,000 dollar salary, better opportunities for overseas professionals (e.g., veterinary nurses) to get Australian residency, better subsidies for farmers so they can afford more comprehensive and more profitable veterinary services or even cash subsidies for veterinary surgeons offering rural services!

#### **University Training**

Where to start?

Free university education (just as the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University and I received – without which neither of us would have received our degrees which has, therefore, provided 50 years of services to our respective communities).

(<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jun/21/university-of-melbourne-vice-chancellor-calls-for-free-university-education> )

Or at the least, for those that go into rural practice for say five years, full fee refund or debt-cancellation.

Why not start offering Department of Agriculture scholarships, like they did during my study years, with the requirement that the graduate works in rural practice for 5 years or else they need to repay the debt?

In other words, universities (and the community) must stop treating veterinary science as "mini-medicine". Take students back to the foundations of veterinary science. Make rural practice a bigger part of the curriculum, even if that means ATAR scores drop and we return to bachelor degrees.

We must teach students that veterinary science was never intended to be a professional life in an air-conditioned gleaming white clinic with heaps of machines that go "ping" and where they get to play dress-up in blue or green scrubs like "mini-doctors" in their very own version of veterinary *Doctor Kildare*.

Rather students need to be reminded that veterinary science was founded in the heat of a blacksmith's forge and defined by Bourgelat in an effort to rid France of a deadly cattle disease that was killing livestock, creating famine in the peasantry and of course having a financial impact on the wealthy (maybe the latter will at least ring a bell in our current capitalist consumerist contemporary society).

When I first visited China in the early 1990's I discovered that veterinary science students at the South China Agricultural University started off as agricultural science students and at some point, in their course they started taking majors in animal health and diseases graduating as veterinarians. At the

time I was feeling quite superior as a Melbourne University graduate in veterinary science as to the quality of my education, but now looking back, 30 years later, I find my hubris misplaced because all I see now is the bulk of veterinary surgeons performing the most useless and irrelevant services to society – namely companion animal medicine and surgery and at extreme costs.

I was challenged once, when working at Monash University, by the Director of the Centre of Early Human Development about the value of veterinary science (especially companion animal medicine and surgery) in the contemporary world when so much poverty and suffering existed. I was dumbfounded by the question as I had no answer, and I still have no answer today - I cannot for the life of me see how one can justify \$10,000 dollars or more on chemotherapy for a cat with terminal cancer when the cat is suffering from the disease and the treatment. Where is the ethics of the veterinary surgeon that offered and then provided that service and where is the morality of the owner who put their cat through this treatment and for what reason, their own selfishness when, irrespective of the cost, it has no quality of life (i.e., a life not worth living (refer to Mellor [Updating Animal Welfare Thinking: Moving beyond the “Five Freedoms” towards “A Life Worth Living](#) and Green and Mellor [Extending ideas about animal welfare assessment to include 'quality of life' and related concepts](#)) and will not have a survival rate beyond weeks or at most months? The morality of the owner is questioned because one must ask whether that money would be better used for more altruistic and less selfish reasons?

So, in summary our education of veterinary students must be far less elitist and more practical, and the curriculum structured away from companion animals and “mini-medicine” to a more rural focus, even if it means ATAR scores drop to attract the right sort of students. Furthermore, veterinary education, like all tertiary education, must be free, as an investment in graduates is an investment in the country’s future economy – investment in education gives an educated workforce which gives a robust and sustainable economy in the new multipolar and protectionist global order.

### **Veterinary Boards & TGA Scheduling**

The veterinary boards must champion the profession and not undermine it. They must not even entertain gadfly complaints and they must have an understanding of the complexities of veterinary science when away from the capital cities where specialist and emergency services exist on nearly every street corner. As consequence of a more supportive role by the boards, the TGA could reconsider the rescheduling of a basic set of drugs that would assist the farming communities in ensuring welfare standards are met and reducing the workload of overstretched veterinary surgeons (thinking here of the rescheduling of Numnuts® for example).

Anthony E James BVSc.(Hons)  
MSci (Rep Sci)., MSci (IAWEL).,  
MANZCVS, MRCVS