

**Submission  
No 93**

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

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Hello,

I am a single mum and practice owner in Sydney's Inner West. I will just list the issues putting pressure on our business and staff which I believe are contributing to the vet shortage.

1. Our staff endure the most stress from being expected to be perfect. Perfection is difficult, especially when there is a time constraint. The time constraint comes from financial pressures on the business...if we charge enough to have the time to be "more perfect" we will prevent 80% of the population from being able to afford good pet care.

It's also hard to know how perfect to be sometimes as our Practitioner's Board judge our standards AFTER the fact. The laws are deliberately vague in order to allow some essential freedom of interpretation. I would love it if the Board were allowed to "pre-judge" standards in certain situations instead of the current preference of "after the fact".

Also, students working under academics at the university hospitals with a strong perfection mentality and frequently a culture of criticism of other colleagues is a huge discouragement to vets who go out into practice. There is an expectation that is impossible to live up to. The teaching hospitals should be staffed by a certain ratio of good general practitioners (OR specialists who have worked in a non-university environment at least) in order to dispel this "perfectionism" attitude.

To summarise, a huge number of veterinary "perfectionists" do not cope in the industry and either suffer crippling mental health issues and/or leave the profession.

2. Vets come out of school not understanding that they are in a service industry. Many don't want to "sell" best treatment to clients, it makes them uncomfortable. Placing some criteria within the selection process for students to do the course that encompasses a passion for what the job actually entails would be very useful. Time management and balancing standards of care in a realistic way needs to part of all of the courses training vets.

3. Many of our overseas students go back to their own countries once qualified. It would be nice if they had to stay awhile. It doesn't make sense to me to train as many overseas (full fee paying) students if that precludes local students who wish to stay in the industry from gaining one of those limited places. The universities obviously thrive economically on the "full fee paying student" model - I think their intakes need external regulation with industry needs in mind.

4. The rules for allowing students to practice surgery have precluded them from becoming competent at surgery. I have several students and colleagues who have quit (and in two cases not even started) working as a vet. The pressure to be perfect when you start out and have not practiced is immense. In some cases we have had people who have spent years learning under us who are just not ever going to be good at surgery. they need to find this out a lot earlier. There are many ways to improve this situation that are ethical but possibly too emotional for some law makers to feel happy to address. They need to remember that OTHER animals are going to suffer as a result. Practising surgery on an animal that is scheduled for euthanasia anyway, who does not wake up from the procedure, is NOT inhumane at all.

5. Costs of pet care place all sorts of pressure on vets. As an owner I know many other owners who have quit as it is too hard. The quality of pet care available has improved so much in the last few decades. People generally expect this high quality but they don't expect to pay appropriately for it. As a result we have to do more in less time with more documentation, more criticism, a hugely increased potential for liability and are getting remunerated less. Most vets are smart...this is a stupid model.

If a client cannot afford to treat their pet and a vet is placed in the situation of having to euthanise for financial reasons, it is utterly devastating.

Unlike other industries that are driven by the idea that if you can't afford it, you don't get the service, for vets people get the "product" and then complain to us when they can't afford it.

As an industry if we put up prices to a point where vets and all staff are remunerated appropriately, and they have time to do a good job, lots of clients will not be able to afford it. If we can't/don't service people then the animals suffer. There will still be just as many animals to care for...if there are not enough vets there will be an animal welfare crisis.

The government cannot babysit every industry but it can be instrumental in potentially offering tax incentives to clients who elect to take out pet insurance. They can also contribute to the solution by helping our industry educate the public. Perhaps pet care should be part of primary school curriculum?

if people can't afford pet care, it won't stop most of them from getting pets. They will just be less likely to be able to afford desexing, etc and pets will suffer chronic diseases in pain - entirely inhumane and unethical.

6. Public Services - like many other vet clinics, mine treats thousands of wild animals every year FOR FREE. Some practices refuse to do anything but euthanise the ones that are suffering (as per minimum requirements of the law). The rest of us that care a lot get bombarded with cases that take resources from an already struggling clinic. Add to this dealing with the local stray cat population that the local council refuses to deal with, and subsidising desexing for charity groups and you have a business under enormous pressure. My wages bill is 53% of my turnover. If I stopped doing wildlife, strays and rescues I could easily bring it down to 40%. I am heading in that direction as my current budget does not balance.

Surely this is NOT an issue that should be left exclusively to a small bunch of private practitioners? When I worked for a big clinic whose policy was NOT to take in strays or do almost any wildlife work I eventually left. if I hadn't started my own clinic I might have considered leaving the industry. This is another very fixable pressure that I believe the government needs to assist with. Please clarify the OLG laws regarding stray cats and who is responsible for dealing with them. At present they are very vague and our local council has the policy of "there is no such thing as a stray, they are all "roaming"". Surely the council as the official body responsible, who takes in monies from cat registrations, need to be held to account. It is frequent topic of distress in veterinary discussion forums.

7. Assist with overhauling pet insurance. At present us vets are not allowed to give advice as we are not "financial advisers". The folk selling insurance are also not independent financial advisers. I believe strongly in pet insurance but I also believe that standards need to be very transparent, consistent and attractive for pet owners. vets don't expect handouts or babysitting as an industry. I feel bad when I see us portrayed as a bunch of wingers with high attrition rate. The bottom line is that unless costs can cover the care, and OWNERS are in a position to take financial responsibility, then we will continued to be blamed the choices of these owners, eventually get sick of the stress and the poor conditions, then leave the industry.

They are the main points from my perspective as an urban practice owner who supervises and trains students from the university of Sydney every year.

Dr Sandra Hodgins