

Submission  
No 97

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

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

I am relatively new to the Veterinary Industry, soon to be celebrating making it through my first year of work as a Veterinarian. I graduated from Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga with the Class of 2022. I grew up in a regional area of Victoria and from a young age have had an unwavering determination to become a Vet. I remember being 17 years old and having the local vet out to tend to a horse. He was a respected business owner in the local community, who had been practicing in the industry many years. I took this opportunity to eagerly ask him his advice on the best pathway forwards. He shook his head and asked me if I intended to have a family, and if I liked playing sport on the weekends? He advised me to rethink my career path. He was burnt out and honest about the state of the industry. This was the first time I became aware that perhaps Vet medicine was not always as rewarding and fulfilling as I envisioned.

Once I began my University journey, my awareness of the Vet industry and the challenges grew rapidly. Our placement requirements began in the first year of the course and recognition of the enormity of Veterinarians' role dawned on me. Not only did it encompass the mixed animal clinics that I was familiar with, there was a huge responsibility for national biosecurity, public health, food safety, wildlife, rescue and emergency work that was encompassed in the role of a Vet. In many ways the further I progressed through the course, the more I wondered how we would ever feel prepared to enter the work force. However, in August 2022 I commenced my first Veterinarian job. I had less than \$200 to my name after a gruelling year of full-time final year placements across various locations in Australia at majorly my own expense. I worked throughout my degree, however it really was not feasible to work substantially during this final year. Despite plans to have some time off and celebrate after our challenging final year exams, the reality is, few of us could afford it, so we entered the work force instead.

After a particularly busy and emotional challenging weekend on call, I have recently had chance to reflect on my journey this far. I would rate my support system as gold standard, with an incredibly supportive family and friend network, and employers that are extremely supportive and progressive in their approach to employing new graduate Veterinarians. Despite this, after this weekend I found myself wondering how Vets survive in this industry. The reality is, that many don't. Not only do many Veterinarians leave this industry before the 5 year mark (a shorter period than their university degree to enter the profession), we are at a much higher risk of suicide and mental health conditions. I would estimate that less than 10% of my peers have a support system comparable to my own.

The things I have found most challenging in my first year include:

- Financial stress: There is limited assistance available to support us through our University journey, particularly in regards to compulsory placements. Travel, accommodation costs, being away from support networks and full time placements without any compensation means that many of us enter the work force with no savings. Not to mention a HECS debt that is growing at a rapid rate. Our salaries are generally much improved from previous years due to the industries desperation to fill positions, however it is comparable to the increased cost of living.
  - o It would make a huge difference if we had access to university housing/student accommodation/subsidised accommodation facilities to support us on our placements (similarly to many human health students).
  - o Programs to incentivise working in regional/rural areas. Ie- reduced HECS debt's.
  - o Financial support in entering the industry, and possibly incentives for remaining in the industry.

- Government support to allow salary increases within the industry, particularly to regional and rural vets.
  - Increased public awareness of Veterinary costs and their breakdowns. Awareness of programs such as Vetpay, etc that can help pay veterinary bills up front, as well as Pet insurance. Please help change the public perception that Vets are rich because it is “expensive” to go to the vet.
- Mental health challenges: The main contributors to poor mental health in the industry include long work hours, after hours expectations, limited support, unfair client expectations, abuse by clients, a high risk work environment, a large workload and understaffed clinics. Compassion fatigue is huge in this industry. Improving the public’s understanding of the Veterinarians role, their mental load and how finances are allocated is vital.
- Incentives to encourage mental health strategies: eg - fitness passport similar to human health, discounted access to mental health professionals, etc.
  - Public awareness campaigns -- Not One More Vet, etc. Appeal to the public to be more understanding with Veterinary professionals.
  - Increased access to information so that people who enter into pet ownership are aware of the commitment. Owning a pet is a privilege, not a right. Information is power! Even a simple survey that recommended which dog breed is most appropriate for certain individuals and the associated breed predispositions for each breed would aid in reducing our work load.
  - Incentives to attract people to the industry – financial support throughout the University journey, reduced HECS debt’s, etc.
  - Incentives to retain people in the industry – Increased salaries, public recognition for achievements, improved public perception, support to improve return to work rates after children – prolonged maternity/paternity leave, childcare support, etc. Funding and assistance in setting up additional emergency clinics and staffing them. Incentives to encourage a shared after hours system within regional areas.

The more Veterinarian’s that leave the industry, the more the workload increases for those that remain. The more clinics that cease doing after hours, the busier the clinics are that continue to offer this service. Retaining new graduates is key in sustaining the industry, however we need enthusiastic, and passionate mentors too. The large workload at current puts additional pressure on experienced vets as they balance nurturing the next generation of vets, on top of their own work load and mental fatigue. Our job is amazing and unique, but it is hard.