

**Submission  
No 104**

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

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### Shortage of Veterinarians enquiry.

As a seventy one year old veterinarian and after forty five years running a mixed practice in a smallish country town, I have a fair idea of the challenges this presents. And as I rapidly approach the end of my career, I am not bitter about the unsolved problems, but very disappointed in my younger self for not being able to do more about them.

**Firstly I'd like to define the problem. There is not a shortage of veterinary graduates! There is, however, a major problem with veterinarians leaving the profession.**

Thus the real problem is not one of being able to attract young people to our profession, but rather our inability to retain them there.

Why can't we attract and retain professional staff?

Why would a graduate veterinarian, who was in the top few percent of his/her school graduation want to come to work in a small rural practice with all its stresses and long hours for little more than a school teacher working half the hours? This is very stressful.

Especially when they are expected to be proficient in treatment of a number of species (see VPBd notes). This is very stressful.

Especially when city practices are able to offer "normal" working hours, due to the after hours hospitals. This is very stressful.

Especially when client expectations have dramatically increased in recent years. This is very stressful.

Our world has changed significantly in recent years.

Years ago new graduates not much older than myself often faced the prospect of arriving in a country town and after a cursory introduction being told by the boss that he was now leaving for his annual holiday, and that the new chum was solely in charge. Straight into the firing line.

Our generation largely escaped this and were mostly given a settling in period, but conversely were often unable to take their annual holiday because they were unable to leave their new graduates.

New graduates these days expect to be walked through most things before they face them themselves. This is difficult for old heads to understand, but it is real.

More recent graduates are focused on "lifestyle"

Our expectations were to work long hours and share the after hours burden. Theirs are vastly different, and thus the great rise of stress related conditions including suicide.

So why are so many practices remaining small (like ours)? Basically lack of profit leads to lower salaries which leads to difficulty in (inability) attracting professional staff which leads to more after hours work and more inter-species work and more stress which leads to less profit, fewer professional staff, etc.

I don't have the answer but it somehow involves a greater valuation of self-worth, higher hourly charges, greater profit, higher pay, etc. I have often considered changing our model

from a fee for service one (as with the medical profession) to a time-sheet one (as with accountants and lawyers). Too late for me now, but worth considering by your enquiry. It also must include a change in expectations around providing after hours services and proficiency across multiple species.

Our practices are too small. To be able to provide a reasonable after hours service I believe we need a minimum of four vets per practice. This allows for an after hours roster, time off in lieu of overtime, reasonable holiday, sick, continuing education and long service leave – so that most of the time there are 2-3 people on deck.

We are contending with a very diverse case-load – Differing levels of care in differing species – plus competition from other areas cutting into our potential client base. (Lay operators, agricultural companies, etc.). If we are to be able to survive to provide a service to rural and remote areas we need to retain as large a slice of this business as possible, not see it hived off to outsiders.

How do we improve our valuation of our time? One way is to corporatise practices, but I believe this to be the wrong way. Better to offer more advice and guidance on time management, fees, practices, etc. This used to be done in a fashion by the AVA recommended fee schedules, etc., but this had to be dropped as considered anti-competitive. This, I believe to be one of the major factors in the decline of rural practice. Thus we urgently need a replacement to fill the void. **It has generated a feeling/sense of isolation amongst practice owners/managers.** It as if the government cast us adrift to fend for ourselves in a hostile environment just to make someone in Canberra feel better about promoting competition while they sit there in their air-conditioned offices, doing their 35 hour a week job with lots of perks, holidays, superannuation, etc., while we miss out on all these benefits.

As mentioned in my 2020 letter to the VPBd (attached), varying client expectations have placed great levels of stress and workload on our profession. City practices with high standards of care and resulting high fees are providing a great service to clients who are demanding this level of care and I commend them for this. However it has absorbed a lot of the recent graduates who wish to be able to become specialists (even if specialist GPs) – as has happened in the human medical world where basic GPs are becoming very difficult to find other than through immigration. However the rest of us have to try to juggle these clients and their high expectations with the others (approximately 60% in a rural town?) who feel they cannot or will not afford such expense. Thus some have expectations of 24 hour a day high level of care, whilst others just want us to do what we can on a limited budget. It is extremely difficult to balance the two (especially as the limited budget ones often also expect the same high level of care). As I also said to the VPB, **after hours care is the bane of our lives.** Thus an increasing number of practices (worldwide) are paying lip-service to Board demands to provide an after hours service by just closing up, or referring their clients to centres often hours away. Bad luck if it's 5-6 hours like us!

To extrapolate a little on our problems of after hours work; it is mainly the uncertainty (fear of the unknown) which causes the angst. It is no problem to duck into work at nine pm to check the patients, because that is routine. However when the phone rings, we jump and tend to think the worst – a bitch having pups, a cow calving, etc. Especially things which may require extra staff which we rarely have access to at odd hours. Then there is the thought of “I'd better get to bed early tonight, in case I get a call”. Probably worst of all was missing out on so much of my childrens' growing up, as I was on call at least 50% of the time back then and missed birthday parties, school functions, etc., as well as not being able to plan many weekends away.

Having worked all week, we don't want to be at work all weekend (and we certainly cannot expect our staff to do so) so we open for certain hours (in our case 9-11.30 Saturday and 9-10 Sunday/PH), and we hope to get a bit of time off whilst on call for the remainder. Clients

complain about being charged after hours fees, but it is still a loss-making exercise for the practice until it reaches a large size enabling staff rosters. These large after-hours hospitals give a great service, but charge accordingly. Many people cannot afford this.

Also mentioned in my letter to the Veterinary Practitioners Board – “A veterinary practitioner must maintain knowledge to the current standards of practice in the areas of veterinary science relevant to their practice and always carry out professional procedures in accordance with those current standards.” This is, in my opinion completely impossible in a diversely mixed practice! Another reason we need larger practices with expertise in differing areas. I believe that having veterinarians in the practice with interests in different species, and possibly different areas within species is the only way we can go close to satisfying this requirement. A mixed country practice needs to treat a wide variety of species and problems, and no two people can be competent in all these areas, let alone one person.

**Summary.**

Generate more profit to create larger practices to employ veterinarians with more diverse interests so they may stay in the industry, rather than drift off as at present.

Support business management and retention of (para-) veterinary services to help enable the above.

Attachments –

Veterinary Practitioner Board correspondence (2020).

Jasmin Klocker correspondence (2020/21).