

**Submission
No 106**

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

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Date Received: 19 July 2023

Why is there a shortage of vets?

This is something the industry has known for years, and the answer is simple. Of the 118 graduates per year in NSW, there are not enough graduated vets willing to perform the task.

WHY?

Even though every single talented applicant, student and graduate from vet school is highly motivated to fulfill a vocation for being a professional and excel in the provision of care for animals – its highly stressful.

I remember my own indescribable elation at graduating with honours in a Bachelor of Veterinary Science. So why would a graduate from one of the most demanding and expensive university courses refuse to pursue their career? One would expect a successful graduate who had committed so much would follow a lifetime as a veterinarian. But most of our graduation classmates leave the profession within the first 2 years.

1. Upon graduation, we accept jobs with emotionally retarded scumbags who fail to mentor us in any meaningful way and treat us as expendable.
2. Employers blame graduates for the horrific results where adverse outcomes occur, even though it is utterly impossible for a new graduate to attain competency without experience.
3. Graduates fail to forgive themselves for the innocent mistakes they inevitably make and are too immature to cope with the emotional anguish that erupts afterwards.
4. Vets accept the guilt angry clients accuse them of every time one of them feels aggrieved.
5. We share in the grief of bereaved clients after the death of our patients because we become emotionally invested in the outcomes of our cases.
6. It has become routine for the community to make accusations against the profession of greed and money lust. Veterinarians working as employees are regularly exposed to bitter behaviour from clients who consider themselves to be victims of price gouging.

One should not dismiss these angry clients: the corporatisation of the profession has diminished the relationship between the practice owner and the client and cast the employed veterinarian into the role of apologist for pricing scales and professional treatment strategies with which they personally may profoundly disagree but must pursue.

7. Current orthodoxy rates professional liability at previously unheard of levels. Vets practice with extreme levels of professional risk aversion which results in very high costs for the client (who is essentially not considered in this paradigm). “Routine” blood pathology, imaging and ancillary care which is not related to the actual interventional procedure are posed as necessary components of the procedure, despite minimal demonstrated health benefits for the animal (eg an older animal should always be treated as a high risk patient regardless of the blood test results). Accordingly, two-thousand-dollar ‘routine’ dental quotes are not uncommon in current corporate clinics. Vets

and their nurses (rather than offsite managers) are subjected to client anger at perceived super-sizing.

Meanwhile, if the tests were denied, the same hypocritical price angry clients would subject the vet to professional complaint and disciplinary proceedings in the event of an adverse outcome. In which case there would be no professional support for the accused vet, and humiliation at the hands of one's own profession.

Furthermore, veterinarians with experience working for corporates report to me that they are micro-managed and disciplined by their business managers for minor deviations from corporate billing and service procedures. There is no scope for maintaining an adaptive relationship with clients who are personally confronting. For a clinician, this is an unbearable intrusion on their professional status.

8. The Veterinary Practitioners' Board is complicit in this situation through its disciplinary powers. Its investigation committee is not subject to any due legal process or rules of evidence. Vets live in a state of terror at the prospect of client complaints and helplessness in the face the Board and its powers. Whole swathes of unnecessary record keeping, and professional procedures are maintained to mitigate the threat of Board action.
9. The VPB fails to even mention the safety of vets, nurses, and clients in its Code of Conduct for vets, despite the horrific injuries that are suffered at the hands of the animals in our daily work. This is disgraceful. How could any vet have respect for a supervising professional body that does not place the maintenance of a safe workplace as paramount?
10. Vets are forced through the financial constraints of clients into situations where treatments are compromised, denied or animals are even euthanased. These situations are extremely traumatic for both the clients as caring owners and the vet as a vocational professional.
11. While specialist services offer brilliant skill bases and high-level outcomes, their cost structures are simply impossible for much of the community to accept. This fuels accusations across the profession of greed even though general practitioners exist with totally different fee structures.
12. Vets have an extremely poor history of outcomes in their relationships and private lives. It is an old joke that all vets have three wives. But that does not apply to me, since I didn't marry my second one before she threw me out of the house and took off with the kids (it happened). A month after that, I was hospital treated for cellulitis from a cat inflicted wound, and then my father died a month after that. At this point, I was 22 years without a vacation.
13. Vets are experts at euthanasia. And suicide.

I promised myself to not get too verbose, so I will leave matters there.

Strangely, after what I have just written, I admit to encouraging and providing ongoing support to several young people in their journey to becoming vets. To be a vet is an opportunity to live a lifetime of care giving to animals and their owners. It is a unique and glorious vocation. But however, if we pay our vets miserably, and expose them non-stop to the issues that I have outlined, many of them will walk away taking their dreams with them. It will not matter how many that we train and graduate, as it will never be enough to

replace the ones we lose. Many of the brilliant veterinary graduates will not find the resilience to continue to provide their skills. And society is the poorer for their loss.

This submission is dedicated to my best friend at university who graduated with BVSc (Hons), University of Queensland 1984, a highly talented and socially congenial friend whom I considered the most natural colleague in my professional year upon graduation. After a difficult first twelve months in practice in a highly stressful position, he disappeared from the veterinary profession. No-one could even locate him to invite him to our thirtieth-year reunion. I only hope his life has turned out well.

Immediate suggestions for going forward: I am informed that one vet student has had her course increased by 3 years to include such topics as “Astronomy” – REALLY???. Mentoring, in the last 2 years of the course; internships; include topics such as ‘How to run your own clinic’.

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