

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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SUBMISSION TO:

VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES.

(revised, minor additions)

Firstly, I am now retired, and somewhat out of recent touch with current veterinary activities in NSW, Australian nationally, and international. Hopefully, what i herein contribute will be of value.

Currently doing some work as a consultant to veterinary pathologists and poultry veterinarians in Australia, not just NSW.

I worked in a predominant cattle practice, Wingham 1971-72 (towards the end of tuberculosis testing and strain 19 vaccination for brucellosis; also did local abattoir work); cattle development program, disease surveillance, Solomon Islands 1974-77; AgVic Veterinary Research Institute, predominantly working with poultry 1977-87; Houghton Poultry Research Station Institute Animal Health, UK 1987-92; Taronga Zoo veterinary pathologist 1992-94; registrar of National registry domestic Animal Pathology 1992-97; diagnostic pathologist at NSW Agric Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute, Menangle 1974-2018, during which time i acted as Officer in Charge of the regional Veterinary Laboratory on numerous occasions of up to 18 months. I have had experience in clinical work, research, and laboratory diagnostics, and been involved in numerous new, emerging, re-emerging and exotic disease investigations and control programs.

I am currently a registered veterinarian in NSW and a registered specialist in Medicine-Avian (Poultry). I hold the following degrees

BVSc (Sydney Uni 1970)

MSc (Tropical Veterinary Medicine, James Cook Uni 1974)

MANZCVs (Avian Health 1985)

FANZCVS (Avian Management and Diseases 1987)

PhD (Bristol Uni 1995)

A summary I made late last year of the status of veterinary services in Australia – for your information (presume already have something like this).

There are approximately 14,000 registered veterinarians in Australia.

A typical Australian veterinary association annual conference may attract up to 750 attendees.

Registered medical doctors and specialists, 105,000 in Australia; and more than 3,000 new graduates per year. We are not in similar league.

Currently about 60% of profession is female.

80% of recent graduates are female.

Unable to find out number of overseas veterinary students who graduate each year in Australia - varies across the universities: significant but minor group, (wonder if in total 10-15%) many remain in Australia for some time, or settle.

Veterinarians graduate with significant university debts, HECS etc, plus personal debts for accommodation, travel, etc; but starting salaries are relatively low. The final year involves placement in clinical settings, so have to abandon any part time work, still pay accommodation but not use it and pay for lodgings whilst out, requires own reliable transport ... I was examining my personal array of clinical and surgical instruments I had had to purchase whilst at university – not cheap. For those from a working class background or family with limited accessible funds, these costs are a burden. My son-in-law with a medical degree 5 years post graduation, is still repaying personal loans for accommodation, fees, expenses incurred; and is now raising a young family as well – but is receiving a salary to make any veterinarian jealous.

18% employed in mixed practice with some large animal component.

6% work primarily with livestock

70% are in private clinical practice of some sort; remainder, 30% in government, industry, academia etc.

Suicide rate of Australian veterinarians is four times that of the general population; but most of those are from rural and regional areas.

Recent but limited surveys (therefore biased, so be careful how we interpret and extrapolate) indicate a significant proportion of our colleagues facing burn-out, stress, overworked, underpaid, poor work-life balance, limited opportunities for advancement, many considering leaving the profession as dissatisfied with current state of the veterinary professional industry as such (2023).

Although average age is 39, if up to a third are planning to exit the industry within 5 years (as some recent surveys indicate) there will be major pressures on those who remain.

About a quarter of female veterinarians in clinical practice are part-time.

There is a world-wide shortage of veterinarians: and relatively low starting salaries, and low relative to many other professions, for veterinarians in Australia may act as a disincentive.

Rural and regional practices tend to be focused on companion animals (somewhat broader than just small animals dogs, cats, rabbits, budgerigars; ie also farm dogs, pony clubs) with some farm animal emergencies from time to time, calvings, trauma etc. The farming industry has just been through a long drought and livestock numbers were reduced. The financial cost of intervention for individual animals on farms may outweigh the value of the animal concerned, hence veterinary assistance tends to be selective. Involvement in production improvement, breeding, nutrition, disease control, marketing etc, tends to involve a small handful of highly experienced, consultancy type, veterinarians, not the local vet.

Rural and regional practices having difficulty recruiting and retaining veterinarians.

Some or many small suburban practices face financial difficulties.

There are proposals to encourage rural placement of new graduates.

About 500 new veterinary graduates per year, from 7 veterinary schools in Australia.

There is oversupply of new graduates into suburban-metropolitan city practices; yet undersupply of experienced veterinarians into rural and regional areas.

Specialisation, expertise and/or experience within particular industry (poultry, pigs) or species (horses, dogs, cats, wildlife) or discipline (surgery, medicine, epidemiology, pathology) can open opportunities or close them, depending upon demographics, demand, colleague competition, financial remuneration, cost in establishment and training, resources and facilities etc.

Only 42% of Australian registered veterinarians are members of Australian Veterinary Association

As a profession, outside major metropolitan areas, we are a diverse and dispersed profession: small towns may have only a few (2-5) veterinarians, often in some degree of competition with each other. Work is hard and long, stressful, with out of hours, emergency, weekend, and night work, with limited alternative relief.

Veterinarians in regional, rural and remote areas rarely are involved directly in servicing local livestock industry; except for some

ambulatory clinical work if the animal is worth the cost of a veterinary visit and attention. More specific industry work (horse, cattle, sheep, poultry, pigs) tends to be undertaken by veterinarians with recognised skills and expertise in those industries, whether they be registered specialists as such, or not; who come in from elsewhere in the state, or interstate, for that specific purpose, farm visit, sample collection, advice, consultancy etc.

In NSW the district veterinarians perform many services of a broad nature oriented towards farm and production animals : other states have government field veterinarians but not in equivalent numbers, nor with the same connection to the farmers. NSW is unique. (a older review of that service attached).

In 2003, Peter Frawley produced a report to Department Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests of Australia on 'Review Of Rural Veterinary Services.' (attached). There was a Federal response to the recommendations (attached). 10 years later, John Maxwell investigated those outcomes for WA, and found nothing had substantially changed (attached), perhaps even deteriorated.

As you will be aware, veterinary degrees in Australia are a tertiary university degree. Registration as a Veterinarian is granted by the Veterinary Practitioners Board. Further studies can be undertaken at university – masters, PhD etc, or through the Australian and New Zealand College of veterinary science (there is a long and interesting history of the professional colleges in UK initially established under Henry VIII, with the barbers, blacksmiths, surgeons and thus vets being amalgamated under the one college). Overseas qualifications

may or may not be recognised by the VPB. Some colleagues with overseas qualifications, whom i know, have limited registrations under supervision by other registered veterinarians.

I suppose the question that needs to be asked in regards to this review is: is there actually a shortage of veterinarians?

Or is it a shortage of a specific subset?

Or services to a particular component?

There appears to be many recent graduates. Are they being utilised appropriately? – that almost smacks of exploitation. There has been comment that there are excess recent graduates in metropolitan areas but lack of appropriately experienced veterinarians in regional/rural/remote areas: this is a quality issue, not quantity.

What do we actually want veterinarians to do?

Where?

Why?

Who is going to pay them, appropriately, for what they are doing?

Will waiving some of their HECS debt have the desired benefit of attracting them to RRR work, and retaining them in that area whilst they develop explore the other area of life (family, community involvement, sports, recreation).

Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, was opened in 2005 in response to a national shortage of veterinarians, and has attempted to recruit their veterinary students from rural areas – many of the veterinary graduates from CSU have commenced their veterinary

careers in rural positions. Not sure how many of those have remained in rural areas.

If requiring a 24/7 ambulatory response service: how is that to be organised in a regional/rural/remote area where the number of available veterinarians is small.

Role of veterinarians – government, retired, private, overseas recruited – for action in exotic or serious disease outbreak management, needs to be defined. Many of the models are based on an outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, which would be a disaster, but we have found by practical experience (avian influenza; Newcastle disease, Equine influenza) that this does not function when allocated to exotic disease outbreaks in other species, where veterinary and support staff are stripped from normal services; yet the normal services are still required. We have effectively removed any surplus buffer capacity. Recruiting from other states is only possible if they are not directly involved or affected, but we have found that the demand for surveillance in other states then increases so even greater demand to recruit temporarily from elsewhere. NOTE – there is NO WHERE ELSE LEFT to recruit from (except perhaps overseas). Working in government services during exotic disease outbreaks we transferred staff from research contracts into disease control, both veterinarian and support, but that had direct detrimental consequences for their career development and the research projects they were working on/in. During equine influenza, we were instructed to have final reports issued by clerical staff, but as veterinarians we refused to comply, and the clerical staff refused to submit to the responsibility inherent in such reporting; we were finding up to 5% of reports, out

of hundreds per day, had errors in them, not necessarily in the actual final diagnosis. Good clerical officers would have found many of these – we had very good and committed and experienced people that we trusted – but not so confident about recruits from a staffing agency! There were simply not sufficient veterinarians available, anywhere in Australia, neither long term, nor short, to fill this gap for what amounted to 9 months (this post-dated the Frawley reports and responses). The control of Newcastle disease originating from Mangrove Mountain 1999, was unsuccessful despite massive veterinary involvement. Several other emerging diseases – Menangle virus; Bungawannah virus; NSW West Nile virus, Newcastle disease western Sydney, multiple avian influenza outbreaks, and others – were all controlled or disappeared.

Rural livestock industries are subject to droughts and significant downturns in livestock numbers and services required. The recent drought lasted 10 years and decimated many farm enterprises; any veterinary practice, at least partly dependent upon local rural livestock services for income, would be severely affected. Floods and bushfires can ravage numbers. Any industry dependent upon international sales and/or facing international competition is vulnerable.

Have not touched on animal welfare. Public perception of what happens is emotionally fuelled, and in some cases deceptive. I was present in UK when vets were being threatened, and in several cases car-bombed (none fatally but they tried), facilities being raided, and social pressures and accusations put upon us/me. Other colleagues have reported similar harassment. Not nice!

A separate issue is burn out; self harm; poor job satisfaction; life-work balance. Note that majority of recent graduates are female, and many of those females will be working for some of their professional career, part-time (appropriately so with young families etc). Accommodating those with the demands of a busy practice may be 'tricky'. When working in practice I was working every second weekend and on call two nights per week – continuously, and busy five days a week, often starting before 6 am finishing after 8 pm (this was considered standard). ***This is not 9-5 in a metropolitan region close to schools, amenities, child care, relatives, friends and preferred leisure activities ...***

There are no subsidies for veterinary services to the average householder.

Pet insurance will cover certain pets for certain treatments and interventions.

Insurance for high value individuals ie race-horses, are not cheap.

Establishment costs, overheads and maintenance for a veterinary practice, plus salaries for the veterinarians and support staff, nurses etc, are considerable, and must be met by charge for services.

Services by clinical veterinarians for wildlife are usually at limited cost to the presenter, and costs are largely born by the practitioner – there was a review of that a few years ago; it amounted to many \$A-millions per year of free, subsidised if you like, services. Many of those practitioners are already in financial difficulty, so this is an added financial burden, even if it is a responsibility and privilege.

Will let someone more knowledgeable comment on current salaries offered for new and experienced veterinary graduates in NSW.

Reading the websites there is enormous variations with the average salary ranging from \$A80-120K; so no idea if this includes part time, or not (too inconsistent): ***recent graduates, if employed will only have worked half their first financial year return to ATO. Myself and many of my colleagues have had considerable periods of professional career, unemployed or under-employed, and that will be reflected in income averaging.*** Advertisements in rural area for new graduates are as low as \$A70K, and for experienced veterinarians in high demand and with capability, may be \$A120K (i never got near that, comparatively) and can go up to \$A150K but not much greater: by comparison, a recent medical doctor will start at \$A70K but rapidly increase; specialists are different category.