

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

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Parliamentary Enquiry into Vet Shortage in NSW 2023

I am writing as a Veterinarian of some 34 years of experience mostly within the tertiary sector training veterinary undergraduates and higher degree research veterinarians.

Over the past few decades the veterinary profession has seen a very successful evolution of excellent animal health care services through the development of specialist services. A process commenced by Universities but now almost fully transitioned to other independent professional structures such as the various postgraduate colleges of advanced practice.

The quality of care that can now be achieved at the higher end of animal health care is exceptional, with specialist veterinary practices offering services paralleling those expected for human health care. The fact that these specialist clinics tend to be concentrated in capital cities is a minor hindrance given that this is also mirrored in human health referral cases. If the community is willing to travel and pay a premium then they definitely already have access to the highest quality health care for their animals.

Across the world these high level specialist private veterinary practices are continuing to replace universities as the pinnacle of veterinary care. Non-degree based post-graduate professional qualifications are often now achieved through these specialist practices as internships and residencies rather than at Universities. For reasons outlined further below this trend is likely to continue.

Shortage of veterinarians across the profession

This is mostly due to an insufficient supply of graduates. Veterinary graduates find employment in a vast range of workplaces, not just clinical practice. They are needed in Government, Pharmaceutical companies and other industries and workplaces which some veterinarians find more rewarding than clinical practice. More than 13,000 veterinarians in Australia are employed in one way or another and the veterinary graduate *unemployment rate* is probably almost zero. This is simply because they are intelligent and employable problem solvers.

The main reason for the insufficient supply of graduates is the high cost of training undergraduate veterinarians and a reluctance by Universities to cover the shortfall in funding. In the absence of hypothecated funding for Veterinary Schools, alongside a real contraction of Commonwealth supported undergraduate places, there is a desperate need to have a more transparent funding model of veterinary training.

Some institutions have tried to increase income by taking on fee paying internationals and or moving towards domestic fee-paying post-graduate models but this has resulted in little growth in graduate numbers available for the domestic workforce.

There has been a real decline in graduate skills over the past decades. Across the world there is a trend to dramatically reduce the expensive range of animal handling and surgical skills that were once taught as part of veterinary curricula. It would not be hyperbole to say that these have been replaced by *in silico* models and multiple choice exams.

This downward quality trend is driven mainly by an intentional corporatisation of Universities and a real reduction in funding for undergraduate training places. This has occurred alongside a serious decline in University Governance throughout the Tertiary Education sector. There is a lack of transparency in university funding for professional degree programs such as veterinary science and accreditation bodies have proven to be a relatively ineffective ombudsman.

Clinical training is expensive primarily because it involves high staff:student ratios and an obligate necessity for students to have direct access to sick animals. The teaching of veterinary clinical practice slows down the management of clinical cases, mainly for the benefit of students, but this also strangles any income generation that might offset the costs of teaching. Thus placing University Practices in a precarious financial situation. University administrators tend to be only focussed on the dollars rather than the learning outcomes. Outsourcing of university clinical training has been tried using numerous models with very little success.

The ever increasing Animal Ethics scrutiny placed on any teaching or research scenario is also real force at Universities either driving down the number of animals that students can access for learning opportunities or more simply by driving down the number of veterinary clinicians who might be willing to engage with seeking approvals to use animals in their teaching.

A great deal of teaching and research is conducted at Australian Universities that is directly aimed towards benefitting animals. So it is ironic that Institutional Animal Ethics Committees arguably have a greater influence on veterinary curricula than veterinarians or the Veterinary Profession itself.

Institutions using animals for scientific purposes within Australia must establish one or more Animal Ethics Committees directly responsible to the institution. There are four essential categories of membership of Animal Ethics Committees defined in The Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes. While at least one member must be a person with qualifications in veterinary science (Category A) these positions are often difficult to fill with veterinarians with the *necessary experience* relevant to the activities of the institution.

NSW should review and codify the Veterinary involvement using the ANZCCART requirements of Institutional Animal Care and Ethics Committees.

For decades universities have struggled to attract veterinarians into academic teaching and research positions.

One of the driving forces for this is the very low Higher Degree stipends being offered by Universities in comparison to training opportunities through other avenues.

As mentioned above graduates have two main pathways to pursue higher qualifications, one through private specialist practices or the second through declining numbers of lowly paid University residency or PhD programs.

As a further insult many veterinary graduates with a merit First Class Honours Veterinary Degree find themselves ineligible or non-competitive for a meagre PhD scholarship because they are ironically deemed to not have an adequate research background. Many universities advise that they first complete a Bachelor of Science Honours Research year simply to qualify and or make them competitive for a scholarship that is likely to be well below any competitive salary in private practice.

The end result is that Australian Universities lack a strategic plan to recruit Veterinarians into higher degrees and thus academia.

Universities often now appoint minimally qualified junior academics with the barest experience and Bachelor qualifications alone. These junior academics have little hope of being able to meet the rigorous research and professional achievements and expectations of University promotions committees. They also find themselves overworked, battling ever increasing administrative loads and a lack of real support for high quality teaching.

Given the above mentioned successful stratification of general practice and specialist veterinary services at Veterinary Schools across the world, and through their respective accrediting bodies, there has been a logical long term trend to minimise graduate outcomes in terms of day one competencies.

The veterinary profession internationally now expects that graduates will *learn what they need to learn* in their job place.

As mentioned above, the evolution of the profession to this point has been achieved mainly through advances in veterinary care and a realisation that universities cannot possibly teach everything that all graduates might need to know or master all of the skills they might possibly need possess.

Some institutions have tried to change their teaching pedagogies towards a broad process driven approach rather than a traditional detailed and comprehensive knowledge box-ticking approach.

The former model produces graduates that *know where to find knowledge*, whereas the latter produces graduates that think they already *know all they need to know*. Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages with studies showing that both types of graduate converge in their knowledge, skills and attitudes within 2 years of participation in the workforce.

The Australian community and the Veterinary Practitioners Board should accept that new graduates need more supervision and support as part of their on-going life-long learning. Practitioners Boards already acknowledge this to some degree by expecting all veterinarians to annually undergo and provide evidence of continuing professional development (CPD).

A category of limited registration could be applied to both new domestic graduates, overseas trained veterinary graduates and or veterinary technicians. We already have a stratified mechanism of registered veterinarians with specialist registrations clearly possessing higher skills and qualifications.

There is already a mechanism of “Limited Registration” which is available to overseas trained veterinary graduates (and others) who must work under the direct supervision of a registered veterinarian.

The Veterinary Practice Act 2003 (Act) (s 19) provides that the Board may impose a condition on the registration of a veterinarian if the Board is satisfied the condition is warranted. The Board may impose a condition that a veterinarian is required to work under the supervision of another registered veterinarian based on concerns for the safety or health of any person; concerns for the health or welfare of animals or any particular type of animal; ensuring Australia’s international reputation in relation to exports, animal welfare, animal production or sporting events; complying with provisions of other legislation or other registration authorities; monitor a veterinarian’s practice of veterinary science; and in relation to any impairment suffered by a veterinarian. Furthermore the Act defines that failure to provide adequate supervision as an example of unsatisfactory professional conduct.

Already the Board may determine that a veterinarian must work under the immediate supervision of another registered veterinarian, whereby the **supervising veterinarian** must be:

- immediately available to provide support or assistance and veterinarians subject to this condition must only perform restricted acts of veterinary science in the presence of the supervising veterinarian,
- readily available to provide support or assistance and veterinarians subject to this condition must only perform restricted acts of veterinary science when the supervising veterinarian is located at the same premises or location
- available to provide timely support or assistance when required and the veterinarian subject to this condition must only perform restricted acts of veterinary science when the supervising veterinarian is available for consultation either in person or remotely

It seems logical to extend this mechanism to include veterinary technicians, overseas trained veterinary graduates and domestic undergraduate veterinary students in their clinical year of training. This could immediately resolve many of the current problems facing veterinary practice.

Recommendations

- 1) As outlined above the Board probably already has the necessary legislative framework to allow for a base category of **limited registration** which could be more broadly applied to:
 - Domestic final year Veterinary Students undertaking their prescribed clinical training.
 - Overseas-trained Veterinary Graduates working under supervision in clinical practices
 - Veterinary Technicians with appropriate tertiary qualifications working immediately supervised by a registered veterinarian.
- 2) In each university’s annual report to the NSW Parliament there should be a line item that clearly states what each University has spent and invested in Veterinary Training alongside any veterinary practice income; the number of enrolments and; the number of veterinary graduates for that year. This would allow for clearer monitoring of inputs and outcomes.

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