

**Submission
No 111**

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

Name: Evan Kosack

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Letter to the parliamentary Parliamentary Enquiry into the Vet Workforce.

On behalf of Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital and Lennox Head Veterinary Clinic.

To whom it may concern,

I have worked as a Vet for nearly 40 years now, and 25 of these years have been in the Northern Rivers region of NSW. During my career I have tended to most species of domestic pets and farm animals, as well as a significant proportion of patients that are native animals.

A veterinary career carries with it a certain amount of ongoing stress of course, due in part to the high case load and the expectations and hopes of both Vets and Nurses to provide the best care they can to animals in need. There is a significant amount of interacting with the public and the media as well as directly to clients. All this is well and good. However, Vets are placed under enormous stress in other ways that are often not immediately apparent to those outside the profession.

In the course of doing their duties, veterinary staff are frequently (ie multiple times a day) subjected to emotional trauma from clients who often demand extensive services for their pets but are often unwilling to pay for it. This creates a situation where veterinary staff are put in the unpleasant situation of trying to do the best for their patients, but also having to explain that a Vet practice like any other has to charge for its services. Many members of the public don't appreciate the high costs of medicine and surgery, especially since the equivalent in Human medicine is heavily subsidised. Even in cases where Vets perform work free of any charge for wildlife, they often are subjected to verbal abuse from those who disagree with a vets opinion.

Not infrequently, staff are subjected to outright verbal abuse and occasionally physical threats. This casts a cloud over a caring profession that most got into because they want to help animals and their owners have the best lives together. A combination of this emotional abuse, long hours, poor pay, high tuition and professional development costs, and understaffing forces about 40% of new graduates out of the industry within 4 years of entering the profession. The stress of trying to do the best job you can while often having to justify your fees in the face of some members of the public that feel vets are a wealthy elite, can be emotionally draining, and in some cases overwhelming.

I personally, have lost 3 friends in the profession from my graduating year to suicide. Vets are currently the leaders in per capita suicide rates across Australia. Many others are no longer in the profession due to the above factors. Of those that remain, many no longer work in private practice and have moved online or work for research groups. Some are still in the profession against their wishes due to intractable debt and a sense of obligation to clients and staff. Most of the vets I know, including myself, have felt the need for ongoing counselling at various times due to the stresses of the profession. The situation is far from ideal.

Several years ago, I helped establish the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital (BBWH). The aim was to put back into the community something that would fill a desperate need and provide better care for Wildlife in the Northern Rivers and beyond. Up until the establishment of BBWH, all the veterinary care given to wildlife was via the pro bono work of local veterinary GPs. This has always been the case across Australia. The Northern Rivers is relatively unique in that it has a rapidly growing human population in one of the most bio-diverse areas of Australia. As a result, wildlife care takes up a significant part of the day of your average Vet in this region.

Before establishing the BBWH, I estimated that I was spending approximately 2 hours a day attending to wildlife and liaising with wildlife carers. This is not including the after-hours emergency cases involving wildlife that may be attended. The public get very emotionally invested with wildlife they find and often the decision to treat or euthanise those animals that are not salvageable is met with skepticism or hostility. The public has a general perception that Vets are well compensated for their time and materials. This of course is not the case at all. Vets, almost exclusively, have no access to any funds other than their own. It's rare that a Vet clinic receives any funding even from well established and financially liquid groups such as WIRES.

My 1.5 vet practice alone would have conservatively spent about \$10000 a year on drugs and materials alone, not to mention professional time, hospitalisation, cleaning, nursing costs etc etc. Also not mentioning the time that wildlife care cuts into domestic pet care or taking into account the 2 hours a day, minimum, spent by staff on wildlife. That equates to treating about 3 to 5 animals a day. That in turn would equate to about \$75000 p.a. conservatively in professional fees. That estimate was based on figures from 4 years ago, before the BBWH was available, and before costs of running a vet clinic skyrocketed.

Since the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital has been operating, the amount of time needed to be spent on wildlife by local Vets in a wide catchment area has dropped dramatically, as have the costs dedicated at Vet clinics expense to Wildlife care . Also dramatically reduced is the anxiety and mental health issues that dealing with wildlife and a heavily invested public entails.

Putting the financial stress on a practice by the drug expenditure on wildlife alone in context, back in 2000, industry average Net profitability ran at about 20-22%. Currently that average profitability is about 12%. Much of this drop in profit has been due to exponential increases in the cost of drugs, other disposables and infrastructure, as well as wages. It's obvious that it doesn't take much change to these costs to severely impact a Clinics viability . Since Vets have traditionally done all this Wildlife work free of charge in most cases , the capacity to continue to do so is in dire straights.

The BBWH has , in a direct way, helped minimise a lot of this extra financial stress on private practitioners. This is something overlooked by those who have declared that subsidising such a facility is not a good return on investment. Prior to the BBWH, all the investment in Wildlife emergency medicine was in the hands of private Veterinary clinics who could (especially in the current economic climate) ill-afford the financial and the emotional costs.

The emotional cost of Wildlife care on veterinary staff is also a major factor that is not considered at all . Anything to do with wildlife is emotionally charged, and vet staff are often the subject of criticism and abuse by disgruntled people that don't realise the practicalities and the ethical/legal considerations in wildlife care , and think Vets are handsomely compensated for their efforts by the government .Vets will put themselves under pressure as well , since most are not specifically trained to deal with wildlife and are well aware that the care they can offer may not be optimal.

A state-of-the-art specialist facility like the BBWH not only provides optimal care for all wildlife , 7 days a week , totally free of any charge. It also removes a considerable financial and emotional load from local Vets and their staff already finding the profession challenging. The facility has so far been completely conceived, constructed, and operated with funds raised from public donation. No large corporate help has been procured, and no assistance whatsoever has been received from any government sources in spite of considerable lip-service and

public grandstanding to the contrary.

Allowing an established and valued facility like the BBWH to close by withdrawing promised assistance will not only severely disadvantage the community and wildlife, and remove the capacity for veterinary care to be deployed to emergency situations such as bushfires (NB an expected devastating summer ahead...). It will also leave 16 specialist Vets and ancillary staff and nurses unemployed. It will result in a 2 million dollar facility with high-end equipment built with private funds going to waste, and damage the likelihood of further significant private donations to support such facilities in the absence of any meaningful government assistance. It will also generate considerable public cynicism in the willingness of government to assist in the care of wildlife, damage the veterinary professions professional bodies opinion of the government and any commitment it alleges to the care of wildlife and the veterinary industry, and exacerbate the already dire state of mental health and employment prospects in the veterinary industry. All this at a time when the government is commissioning enquiries into the poor state of affairs in the Veterinary Industry. The irony is almost laughable.

As I mentioned, I have been a Vet now for about 40 years. In all this time, in all the clinics I have worked, I have not received a single dollar or any assistance, at all, from any government body, whether State, Federal, or Local. It's frustrating that the general public thinks that the government supplies funding to Vets for this work, and that the government does nothing to disabuse the public of this view.

A current promise, in front of media and the public, to support the running costs of a struggling BBWH for 4 years was recently reversed at the last minute under the premise of it not being a "good return on investment". A nebulous comment was passed in feedback from the State government that it was assisting Wildlife care in other ways. None of these "ways" have been obvious to me, and Vet clinics certainly have never seen any of this alleged assistance.

Decisions and platitudes like those dispensed by the NSW Government on this topic are not only disheartening, but they are insulting to a profession and to the various groups that are using their own time and funding to make a difference in a very real and visible way.

Time is rapidly running out for the BBWH, and the fallout to local veterinary clinics and animal welfare groups will be devastating both financially and on the mental health of veterinary staff. If the NSW

government is actually serious about their responsibilities for Wildlife preservation as well as doing something real and tactile about Mental health in the veterinary industry, then assisting the BBWH, helping its Vets and support staff to survive , as well as giving access to some form of compensation to assist struggling Vet Clinics with their ongoing pro-bono work with wildlife, would be a demonstrably good place to start.

Sincerely,

Dr Evan Kosack BVSc (Lennox Head Veterinary Clinic, co-founder
Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital)