

Submission
No 112

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

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Veterinary Workforce Shortage Submission

I am a veterinarian and have been the owner and operator of a mixed veterinary practice on the NSW south coast (Nowra) for the past 26 years (11 years in partnership, 15 as sole owner). Our practice services both large and small animals, including many of the surrounding dairy and beef farms, as well as treating small ruminants and horses. We operate out of a purpose built, modern veterinary hospital, built just over 3 years ago. We provide a high standard of small animal medical and surgical care. We also offer a 24-hour after-hours service to our clients. We employ 24 staff, which includes 10 veterinarians and 14 nursing/support staff.

You are going to read a lot about conditions and pay rates. The Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award has meant that conditions have greatly improved since I graduated 32 years ago. It has also enabled more consistency across different types of practices. Being a veterinarian has always been difficult at times due to, among other things, the unpredictability of the workload. I think some veterinarians want it to be a 9 to 5 job and many of the younger generation do not cope with the realisation that, usually, it is not.

With regards to attracting vets to regional areas, it has been difficult for over fifteen years. Therefore, salaries have increased significantly, as most practices are trying to retain current associates, as well as trying to attract new ones, which in our case, are usually new graduates. One of my sons has just begun working as a pharmacist and another one of my sons recently completed a combined Law/Engineering degree – both started on lower salaries than what we have paid our new graduates starting within the same time period. My third son, out of interest, is currently enrolled in a veterinary degree.

Although there are many reasons for the veterinary shortage, in my opinion, the one having the most impact is the fact that over the last 20 years or so, the intake of veterinary students into vet schools has been around 90% female. Female veterinarians are just as capable as, and in many cases, more capable than their male counterparts, but unfortunately, a large number are lost to the profession once they start having families. Across the whole Australian work force, less than 50 % of females return to full time work after having children. I have no doubt that it is similar, or even a lot less, for the veterinary profession.

In my own practice, I have never had any female employee return to full time work once they have had children, this includes both veterinary and support staff, as well as my wife (who is also a veterinarian). The reasons for this are many. In regional/country towns, if you do not have family support then childcare places, especially for under 2-year-olds, are very difficult to come by. The unpredictability of our workload, being on call and weekend work is, at times, not very family friendly and relies on the veterinarian having a supportive partner. Another issue around losing full time employees from the veterinary profession relatively early in their careers, is that many do not develop their skills sufficiently before having a significant amount of time out of the workforce.

So even though Australia appears to graduate enough veterinarians on paper, most practices need to employ more vets to be able to function. Our practice requires 6 full time veterinary equivalents, and we currently employ 10 vets to allow us to operate to the level we strive for.

The solutions to these issues are not straight forward. A short-term answer is to fund more veterinarians in university vet schools. Possibly offer incentives/scholarships for males to enrol in vet degrees, as has been done to encourage females into engineering/maths degrees, as well as males into teaching. Look at HECS relief for those graduates choosing to work in country or regional areas. Create/fund more childcare places to allow female vets to return to work sooner.