

Supplementary
Submission
No 74b

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

Undisguised sexism is not only making life difficult for women who work in the veterinary industry, but also derailing many of the conversations about the veterinary workforce shortage. It would be a pity if it also dominated this inquiry.

Some of the many examples that I have observed are outlined in this submission.

- The benefits that women can offer the profession are frequently downplayed, while the advantages of being a man are exaggerated. As a student, I often heard non-vets in my community lament the underrepresentation of men among veterinary students when we were discussing the gender makeup of my year group. The reason most commonly cited was that men are physically stronger and, as a consequence, better suited to working with heavy animals, especially in a rural setting. I don't know what sort of men these people know, but being a few kilograms heavier is unlikely to make it possible to lift a 600 kg dairy cow. (Having a slender arm, on the other hand, is a major advantage when working with these animals.) In companion animal practice, much of the work that relies on physical strength is done by the nurses, who are the ones normally tasked with restraining patients and lifting them onto the table to prepare them for surgery, but these same detractors rarely bemoan the even higher proportion of female vet nurses. It's almost as if their preference for men is about prestige and tradition rather than ability.
- At one of my rural placement clinics, where I was accompanied by another student, the male practice owner (while slightly inebriated) was talking to us about his problem with female vets, i.e. that they were just too indecisive. Another (male) vet in his employment found this hilarious when he heard about it later, because the practice owner himself was notorious among staff for this very quality, which this vet had never noticed in his female colleagues. The female vets we shadowed at this particular clinic were mind-blowingly intelligent and capable, but I couldn't help wondering whether this sexist attitude, even if it wasn't always openly expressed, would end up wearing them down and driving them away. The two of us had certainly felt uncomfortable.
- In 2016, the then-chancellor of Massey University in New Zealand stated that a female veterinary graduate was worth 2/5 of a male graduate because she would "marry and have children". This mirrors some of the discussions I've seen on veterinary social media pages blaming the feminisation of the veterinary industry for employers' inability to find staff. However, a 2021 paper in the *Australian Veterinary Journal* ("Risk factors associated with veterinary attrition from clinical practice: a descriptive study" by Arbe Montoya et al.) found that men are actually more likely to leave clinical practice than women. Therefore, increasing the proportion of men might even exacerbate the shortage if other issues aren't addressed. (For all his focus on women's ability to bear children, the chancellor neglected to consider women's higher life expectancy, which could allow them to contribute to the profession for longer. Biology does not only favour men.)
- There is also the matter of men remaining in the veterinary profession but not in clinical practice, where the real shortage is. Of the male students in my cohort, as well as the

men of my acquaintance in other classes, very few remained in full-time practice only a few years after graduation. Some of the others - if they haven't left to do a completely unrelated job - are working as locums, but many are in industry (e.g. drug company representatives) and government offices. This is consistent with my experience as a placement student in a government office, where I was struck by the high number of male vets I encountered compared to what I'd observed at my clinical placements. Compared to practice, this work tends to be better remunerated and less stressful, with family-friendly hours. It doesn't seem to reflect badly on male vets as a whole when they seek these jobs.

- In one of the submissions to this inquiry already published (number 27), a rural vet specifically blames women who have married for leaving an established practice (presumably the submitter's own) in order to "do the easy pickings from the back of the car", which I take to mean running an ambulant service that does not offer complicated surgical procedures. Disregarding the fact that many male vets, including one of my university lecturers, have also started mobile clinics, this doesn't sound like "easy pickings" to me. At nearly all of my university placement clinics, as well as the clinics that have employed me since graduation, vets would practically fight over the surgery shifts because they preferred this work to the emotional labour of dealing with clients. Some vets even had to be enticed back to work with the promise of a surgery-only workload, to the chagrin of some of their colleagues who had to continue consulting. If the experienced female vets are choosing to go into such a business, with all the administrative headaches this brings compared to being an employee, it tells me two things. The first is that they're very dedicated to the profession, because they're determined to continue to serve this rural community as clinicians, despite the lack of available jobs that would accommodate them. The second is that the veterinarian making the submission may not be making the necessary adjustments to retain good staff.
- In an open letter published in 2021, a veterinary practice owner in NSW decried the lack of veterinarians willing to work for her. She particularly singled out the dominance of women in the industry for criticism, stating that half her female veterinary employees no longer work full-time hours by the age of 30. Perhaps she should have been thankful that the part-time female veterinarians were willing to work for her at all when the men were not, instead of complaining about their desire to make work compatible with their other responsibilities. I've worked with plenty of female veterinarians who have had children, including those who work full-time hours, and with male vets who have had to adjust their working hours around family commitments. Then there are the male and female vets without children who have opted for part-time work as an alternative to leaving practice altogether, as they've determined that they can only maintain their passion for clinical work if they combine it with a different job, e.g. government policy work. If the author was unable to find enough vets willing to work for her, there was probably another reason for it. (The tone of her opinion piece, and especially her negative views on

younger vets and flexible working conditions, led me to suspect that her attitude may have been holding her back from becoming an employer of choice.)

- The author's declaration that female vets with children don't want to do after-hours work, and that this can lead to "a decline in mental health and wellbeing" when they do, was especially surprising. When I've been a client or student at emergency veterinary clinics, I've dealt almost exclusively with female vets and nurses, including those with children. One sole-charge emergency vet who supervised me missed the first night of a weekend away with her husband and children because her busy evening shift extended far beyond the time she was scheduled to finish. Another barely managed to sleep because her night shift finished only a few hours before her weekend day shift started and she didn't want to leave the new starter alone. Yes, this is a stressful job and could affect wellbeing, but I can't imagine why this wouldn't also apply to a man in the same circumstances. The implication in the letter seemed to be that women are particularly emotionally unstable. Mental health issues also affect male vets, as those of us in the industry are painfully aware.
- Other aspects of this vet's letter, such as her desire to see a university application process based on entry criteria other than just school results, were a little out of touch, given that other entry criteria had been used for years by the time she wrote it. It is unclear whether she believed this might give a boost to male applicants, but it would not be a far-fetched assumption, based on similar sentiments I've heard expressed elsewhere. The aforementioned university chancellor, who reportedly lost his job as a result of the response to his comments, had put women's overrepresentation in the veterinary degree program down to the science-heavy subject composition in the early part of the degree, which he felt put young men at a disadvantage because they weren't as academically inclined yet. In conversations I've had with older vets, this line of reasoning is often used to argue for softer entry requirements or gender-specific scholarships for male applicants, to allow them to bypass the initially stringent academic standards in order to shine in practical areas later on. But aren't we always being told that girls are naturally averse to taking STEM subjects? Aren't men overrepresented in certain other STEM-heavy courses, such as engineering? Isn't there a much higher proportion of male students in human medicine, where entry requirements are infamously tough but the pay is good, than in veterinary medicine? And doesn't the prevailing stereotype suggest that women possess the "soft skills" required for client communication, i.e. the practical side of the job? The narrative seems to change daily, depending on the problems for which women are being blamed or the skills that women supposedly possess or lack.
- Sexism isn't the only "ism" that plagues the industry. I turned down a graduate position I'd wanted in a regional area because the practice owner made offhand comments denigrating Asian vets at the interview, based on the fact that the only Asian vet he'd ever hired had occasionally turned up late for work. I was the only non-Asian applicant (which he'd determined based on my name), and the only one he'd invited for an

interview. However, this is an issue that warrants a submission of its own from someone with first-hand experience of it.

By all means, let's consider all the reasons for the veterinary workforce shortage, including gender if it's relevant, but we should back these assumptions up with real evidence. At the moment, the evidence doesn't seem to support the sexist myths being perpetuated.

I would love to see more men working as veterinarians and veterinary nurses, mainly because I value diversity in the workplace. (Also, in my experience, the clients with the greatest sense of entitlement are the most likely to insist on seeing the practice's token male vet, and I'm always relieved to dodge that bullet.) However, if men are choosing not to join the profession or remain in clinical practice - perhaps because they've decided to vote with their feet in relation to the pay, hours or abuse from clients and colleagues - we should be examining and addressing the reasons for this, rather than blaming the presence of women who step up to the plate in their absence.