

**Submission
No 119**

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

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Veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

Who am I?

I am a veterinary surgeon working in companion animal practice in semi-rural NSW for over 15 years. Before that I directed a veterinary hospital in London for ten years, and I have been a working vet for nearly 40 years. I have huge amounts of experience in hiring and mentoring veterinarians, both new graduates and experienced team members.

What's the current status in a working practice?

There are currently only three vets in our practice, there used to be five full timers. We have been looking for a vet since 2018 with no success. This problem has been creeping up on us gradually, in 2008 we used to regularly get over 100 applicants for a veterinary surgeon position, now it is zero.

Is the problem local?

The problem is not local, it is global, there are no vets or locum staff to employ in the UK either, and there are excessive veterinary vacancies throughout the Anglosphere.

The EU still produce vets, many work in the UK, although the UK is still in a severe staffing crisis.

A change of work visa restrictions will do absolutely nothing to help the situation as there's nobody to attract from our usual markets of the UK, NZ, Canada, or South Africa.

What are the associated problems?

We have had to close one of our hospitals because we could not staff it. Many practices are closing or becoming staffed part time.

There is now another emerging problem, we want to retire soon, but there's nobody out there to buy our very profitable business.

There is some venture capital/corporate investment in the industry, but they are unwilling to over invest in the industry because they too see the huge recruitment issues.

What are NOT the solutions?

1. Visa changes - there are no spare vets anywhere in our usual markets for vets, and the costs and red tape involved in sponsoring applicants is prohibitive and time consuming, particularly when there's nobody to recruit at the end of the process. I have first hand experience of this.
2. Wage increases - pay rates have increased in the industry by as much as 60% over the last 3-4 years. Although not a well paid profession, the rates are now much more appropriate for the job. There is however a fixed ceiling for wage growth, because our wages are paid by our clients, who have finite resources for pet care and can be very shouty as they are often very stressed by having a sick pet and no money.
3. Mental health support and mentoring new graduates.
This is now pretty much in place everywhere, there is a clear understanding by the profession of the mental health and stresses that our members are under.
Flexible working - most of the profession is now female, and still tend to have more of the domestic and child care duties. Typically 10 am to 3 pm hours are in great demand by veterinarians, unfortunately the job is busiest from 8-10 and 3-6 pm. However we have all tried to work around this one already.
4. Removing acts of veterinary surgery and allowing others to do them to 'lighten the load'.
This sounds great, but they are acts of veterinary surgery for a reason, and the profession will not flourish if the profitable and 'easy' bits are removed from the job.
(This is why we have so many horse dentists who often are illegally using sedatives and outdated techniques for a job better done by a vet who has the medical and anatomical training)

What might be the solutions?

1. Easy easy cheap visa entry, without sponsorship or further exams/qualifications for veterinarians from the whole EU zone. Current NSW veterinarians should be able to employ EU graduates who should get NSW board certification as a formality (as UK graduates do), without any extra up front costs. This is the only area globally which has enough vets of a comparable qualification status. There also needs to be no requirement for vets to have a minimal time already working, we need experienced, new graduates, FT, PT we need to welcome them all.
2. A compulsory survey of all graduates at 12 months out to find out why they left the profession so fast (not a self selected snapshot of the disaffected or ecstatic as currently happens).
2. University review of student selection. Stop choosing the wrong people. Don't let university veterinary specialists get involved in recruiting. A high ATAR is not the answer. Charles Sturt Uni has the best graduates, everywhere else has produces an unsuitable product for the industry. These graduates are unsuited, unhappy and leave.

Currently many people who are unsuited to the job start the course and then drop out, leaving a vet shaped hole for 4 years into the future, you cannot just slot another student into the gap. More practical skills and less academic skills is where we need to be looking, and a requirement to spend at least 3 months working in a vet practice before application may help, or restructuring the course to be both in working practice and at university.

3. Expectations of the job - teach students for a job in general practice - universities are interested in advancing veterinary medicine, and therefore most new graduates come out influenced by this and wanting to work in specialist hospitals rather than GP practices. Result - the specialist hospitals get the few graduates that there are looking for intern positions, and the profession at large gets no veterinary staff.

Perhaps we need a system whereby two years have to be completed in general practice before moving to a specialist centre.

4. Promote pet insurance to the general public.
Our main issues are always those of client finance, if pet insurance was promoted as the right thing to do it would remove a huge stressor from the profession and allow us to do a better and more rewarding job, and reduce the numbers leaving.
5. Reduce anti veterinarian comments on social media
this is a big stressor in causing younger vets to leave the profession. Perhaps ban advertising and comments on social media as unprofessional and misleading.
6. Accept that this is our future, and we need to plan differently
Promote much larger veterinary hospitals, the general public will have to travel further but efficiencies and camaraderie amongst the veterinarians may make it a more attractive profession - currently general lack of staff makes the job stressful and a bit lonely.

Accept that regional areas will have no vets.

Accept that large animal veterinary treatment is now only a herd management industry job, and that there is no longer any call for a local cattle vet. This has happened to chicken production and pig production with an often FIFO system for workers.

Accept that owning a pet is a privilege and luxury, not a right, and that veterinary health care is very expensive, and must be budgeted for.

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