

## INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:** The University of Adelaide - School of Animal and Veterinary  
Science

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## Response to the Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

### Terminology:

UK	Veterinary Nurse (VN) - Bachelor and Diploma level equivalent qualifications
USA	Veterinary Technician (VT) - Diploma level equivalent qualification
	Veterinary Technologist (VT) - Bachelor level equivalent qualification
Australia	Veterinary Nurse - AQF level 4 through to AQF level 7 qualifications
	Veterinary Technologist - AQF level 7 qualification
VN/VT	Used to be inclusive of both professional titles

The University of Adelaide, School of Animal and Veterinary Science welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales inquiry, particularly in response to TOR 1.d – The role of, and challenges affecting veterinary nurses. As educators of the future leaders of the veterinary industry, we are committed to ensuring that our graduates are equipped with the knowledge and skills to enhance the veterinary sector. Our programs reflect this commitment, now encompassing the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, a Bachelor’s Degree in Animal Science, a Bachelor’s of Animal Behaviour and the Bachelor’s Degree in Veterinary Technology. Our newest program, the Bachelor of Veterinary Technology, has proven to be hugely successful. With our first cohort of graduating students primarily entering clinical veterinary practice, we foresee that these students will have a significant positive impact on the veterinary industry as we equip students with the skills, knowledge and attributes to enhance patient care as part of an integrated veterinary team.

Whilst our program at The University of Adelaide is a relatively new program, there are now approaching 800 higher education graduates from four programs across Australia. These include the B.VT at the University of Adelaide as well as the first of the B.VT degree programs in Australia at The University of Queensland (commenced 2001), B.VT at Charles Sturt University (commenced 2015) and the Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing at La Trobe University (commenced 2018). It is expected that the Bachelor level programs for VN/VT will assist to address the demand for veterinary services within Australia with many graduates finding employment in clinical veterinary practice within veterinary nursing teams.

The importance of operating veterinary practices with appropriate VN/VT to patient ratios has been highlighted in recent research investigating errors in a small animal intensive care unit. Here researchers have found that there is a substantial reduction in major care errors when ICU patient to VT ratios are maintained at  $\leq 4$  (Hayes et al, 2020). Whilst it is clear that VN/VTs are critical to upholding high standards of veterinary patient care, this workforce is leaving the veterinary sector due to what has been termed the "dissatisfaction crisis" (Rumple, 2021). In 2011, Michigan State University, College of Veterinary Medicine convened a national conference called "Creating the Future of Veterinary Technology—A National Dialogue"; and a common theme that emerged was that "VTs hit the ceiling of the profession relatively quickly, leading to career burnout" and the loss of highly skilled workers within an average of five to seven years (Chadderdon, Lloyd & Pazak, 2014). Whilst the importance of maintaining adequate VN/VT staffing levels is clear, and it is clear that the contributions of this group play heavily in providing modern veterinary medicine, the dissatisfaction crisis of VN/VTs is often overlooked as a contributing factor to the veterinary sector crisis.

A recent survey of the VN profession, by the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) has shown that almost a quarter of respondents (total 4,993 respondents) were planning to leave the VN profession within 5 years (Survey of the Veterinary Nurse Profession, IES Report, 2019). This survey found that almost 30% of VNs in their 30's plan to leave the profession (IES Report, 2019). This trend is evidenced in the statistics reported where there is an almost 50% reduction in the number of VNs aged 30 – 39 to VNs aged 40 – 49 (IES Report, 2019). Similarly, a demographic survey report from the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA) showed that of the 1,886 VT respondents, only a quarter have been in the veterinary field for more than 20 years, with a declining trend after 10 years of practice (NAVTA Demographic Survey, 2022).

Whilst there are certainly other contributing factors to the high attrition of VN/VTs (namely, low salary and poor benefits and increased levels of burnout and compassion fatigue (NAVTA Demographic Survey, 2022)), a study from New Zealand found that VNs are trained in tasks they are not performing in clinical practice and this is impacting on their career satisfaction (Gates, Palleson-Putt & Sawicki, 2021). The underutilisation of VN/VTs in clinical practice not only increases the workload of veterinarians already experiencing high workloads, it also reduces the job satisfaction of VN/VTs with a study from New Zealand showing that there are tasks in which VN/VTs are trained, but not performing (Harvey and Cameron, 2019). Interestingly, over 75% of the tasks identified in this study are currently assessed as part of the day one competencies for the Australian nationally recognised Certificate IV in VN, and at least 80% in the existing HE VN/VT degrees available in Australia (A. Chapman, personal communication, February 10<sup>th</sup> 2023). Further to this, a study of VT graduates from the University of Queensland revealed that a lack of career advancement and lack of recognition by the relevant professions were some of the barriers to fostering career satisfaction (Clarke, Henning, Coleman & Schull, 2019).

Like human nursing in medicine, the VN/VTs remit in clinical practice is wide and varied and absolutely vital to upholding high standards of patient care. In the US, the Institute of Medicine's Future of Nursing report (2011) highlights that "nurses spend the greatest amount of time in delivering patient care as a profession" (IOM Report "The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health, 2010). The indicative roles of a VN as outlined in the Australian Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award

(FairWork, 2020) include but are not limited to; basic animal care; grooming, feeding, cleaning and restraint as instructed; carrying out clinic routines; maintain clinic hygiene, carry out daily treatment of patients; assisting in stock control and clinic security; co-ordinating clinic admissions; providing veterinary nursing care and grief support to clients; applying radiographic routines and implement procedures; performing and record pathology procedures, assist with post mortem; preparing and provide support for surgical procedures; monitoring patient anaesthesia; performing post-operative procedures; nursing hospitalised animals, monitor clinical signs, communicate with owners; providing animal care in pain situations; carrying out medical nursing routines; preparing surgery schedules, implement surgery preparations; cleaning maintain and store theatre instruments, equipment and supplies; and/or carrying out post-operative theatre routines. As it is clear from these duties, the VN/VT profession, like human nursing, is patient focused and few would disagree that VN/VTs spend a majority of their time being directly responsible for the needs of their patients. The IOM report goes on to state that nurses “have valuable insights and unique abilities to contribute as partners with other health care professionals and should be fully engaged with other health professionals, and assume leadership roles in redesigning care” (IOM Report, The Future of Nursing, 2010).

Whilst it is clear that human healthcare has recognised the importance of inclusive strategies and collaborative healthcare, little has been done in Australia to support the advancement of the VN/VT profession through similar strategies. In the UK, the RCVS Workforce Action Plan, an inclusive strategy to identify and address challenges faced by the veterinary team have outlined several ambitions including supporting the professional development and promotion of VNs through leadership (RCVS, Workforce Action Plan, 2022). It is interesting to note that whilst VN/VTs contribute approximately 42% of professionals to the Australian veterinary sector (AVBC Sustainable Practice Committee, Options for Registration of Veterinary Nurses, 2022), outside of Western Australia, the VN/VT profession has never been consistently represented on any Australian Veterinary regulatory Board. Indeed, this has been noted in our own state where, almost in direct contrast to contemporary collaborative healthcare approaches, the recent revisions to the Veterinary Practice Act (2003) and subsequent restructuring of the Veterinary Services Regulatory Board of South Australia (as presented in the Veterinary Services Bill 2023) will ultimately inhibit representation of VN/VTs currently working in practice. Here we would like to point out that successful framework exists for inclusive representation in Australia with the Veterinary Practice Act (2021) of Western Australia. Western Australia is the first and only state or territory that currently recognises veterinary nursing as a profession with legislative and regulatory framework to underpin the work of VNs and the first and only state or territory to appoint a VN seat to the state Veterinary Board.

Further to this, we would also like to note that Western Australia is also the only state in Australia where VNs must hold recognised qualifications and register with the state Veterinary Board to practice and are thus, expected to comply with the Act and Regulations, upholding standards of professional practice. The fact that this has yet to be considered in other Australian states is in direct contrast to the reported findings from the Performance of Veterinary Services Evaluation Report of Australia where the World Organisation for Animal Health recommended that Veterinary Boards develop registration procedures for veterinary paraprofessionals in accordance with the OIE Terrestrial Animals Health Code (OIE-PVS Evaluation Report of the Veterinary Services of Australia, 2015). With the exception of Western

Australia, it cannot be guaranteed that VN/VTs working in clinical practice hold recognised qualifications, if any at all, and this is despite the continued support of mandatory registration from both the VN/VT and veterinary professional representative organisations:

*The Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia (VNCA) states that they “will continue to pursue mandatory registration and protection of the term Veterinary Nurse after the launch of the AVNAT (Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician) Registration Scheme” (Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, 2023).*

*The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) states that “veterinary nurses are an integral part of modern veterinary practice. The registration, quality training, and continuing professional development of veterinary nurses are essential components of practice” (Australian Veterinary Association, 2020).*

Internationally, initiatives aiming to address the challenges facing the veterinary workforce are inclusive of the VN/VT profession. The RCVS Workforce Action Plan follows the RCVS Royal Charter which recognised veterinary nursing as a profession and the VN Futures Project. The VN Futures Project and Action Plan (a joint initiative from the RCVS and the British Veterinary Nursing Association and running parallel to the Vet Futures Project) has outlined the importance of VN retention in practice and aims to address this through a number of initiatives including reviewing the Veterinary Surgeons Act to “bolster and clarify the role of VNs” (VN Futures Report, 2016). In the US, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has also committed to creating a Committee on Advancing VTs. And according to a recent media release, the AVMA Council on Veterinary Service have initiated their scheduled review of the AVMA Model Veterinary Practice Act and a main focus is to expand the scope of practice for VTs (Larkin, 2023). The fact that similar strategies have yet to be deployed in Australia is disappointing, therefore we propose the following recommendations to address some of the key challenges facing the VN/VT profession:

1. Mandatory registration of VN/VTs working in clinical practice
2. Title protection so that only qualified VN/VTs can operate as professionals
3. Update legislation to clarify the work of VN/VTs and improve utilisation of VN/VTs in clinical practice
4. Implement a unified, collaborative veterinary healthcare approach inclusive of the VN/VT profession enabling VN/VTs to represent on leadership boards and councils

In summary, it is clear that the poor retention of this highly skilled workforce is impacting an industry already in crisis as it perpetually fills vacant VN/VT positions and trains junior VN/VT staff only to have them leave practice within 10 years, taking their skills, knowledge and leadership with them. The significance of this cycle has been recognised with veterinary councils internationally working to empower the VN/VT profession with legislative reform, title protection and mandatory registration. Outside of Western Australia, no other state or territory has underpinned the work of VN/VTs in legislation, nor has mandatory registration been secured despite widespread support for this from both leading professional organisations. Legislative reform must be implemented as first steps towards a commitment to improve, clarify and stabilise the role of VN/VTs in the interprofessional veterinary team. It is clear that current Veterinary Service/Practice legislation, fails to align to contemporary

practices and meet the standards expected of users as it fails to ensure that all members of the veterinary team are bound to standards of professional responsibility in accordance with appropriate legislation and registration.

Lastly, strategies to improve veterinary services and any workforce challenges must be collaborative, encompassing the perspectives of the entire veterinary team. Without this, proposed solutions will fail to address the needs of a contemporary, inter-professional team. Any long-term, lasting solutions will require a collaborative approach with the VN/VT profession as it is clear that as we unpack the remit of VN/VTs in clinical practice, the contributions of this group have played heavily in shaping modern veterinary medicine and must continue to do so. Therefore, we request respectfully, that the VN/VT profession not be overlooked once more as we tackle the veterinary workforce shortage and that instead, the voices of this profession are consulted so that VN/VTs too can contribute to initiatives that will work to stabilise the larger veterinary workforce.

Yours sincerely,

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On behalf of The University of Adelaide's School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences

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