

Submission
No 123

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

Veterinary Workforce Enquiry

Background:

I am the owner of a veterinary practice that used to employ **four full time vets plus myself**. At the end of July when my last full time vet leaves to move to another area where she has purchased a house, I will have **no full-time vets left** and will be relying solely on locum and part-time vets to provide veterinary service to our community.

I have been advertising continuously for 5 years, both within Australia and overseas on multiple platforms, as well as directly emailing every university in Australia that has veterinary graduates ever since my most senior vet went on paternity leave after the birth of his son and reduced his working hours to one day per week. That child has now started school.

During that time, I have had 2 vets who started with me as new grads also leave (one after 3 years to pursue a research career, and one after 5 years to travel overseas) and another more senior vet is currently on maternity leave until September, when she will return part-time for 2 days per week.

In that entire 5-year period, I have had only one applicant responding to the direct university contact, who I employed as a new graduate for the last 18 months. She is leaving at the end of July. Also, just recently I have had a single response to the advertisements. I have had one vet apply for the job who is now starting work full time for me in September, so I will have myself, one full time vet and two part time vets plus locums after September to run the practice.

I am located in a regional area but have a very modern well-equipped practice in a very popular coastal location close to Sydney, so I can only imagine that the situation must be much worse in more isolated areas.

The situation is desperate. I am aware of 2 practices in my area and one in another country town that have had to completely close their doors due to not having any vets.

Rapid/Short Term Solutions:

The only quick fix for the current emergency situation is to source veterinary graduates from overseas. There are several avenues available.

I am an Accredited Sponsor for overseas vets. Unfortunately, all the countries where vets can obtain immediate registration are also experiencing the same degree of veterinary workforce shortages, so that is not a helpful source of vets for Australia.

The visa requirements for coming to Australia are also onerous, and wait times are very long despite supposed recent improvements. Dealing with the Department of Immigration is a complete nightmare, even for the experienced immigration agents that I have at times employed. The Department's procedures and processes are deliberately completely opaque, and also unfair. After many years, I have given up on this avenue. The whole Immigration Department needs a complete overhaul and reset.

Immigration policy is not really a State Government responsibility, but there is one area where the State Government could have **an immediate impact for very little money**. That is in the area of **veterinary registrations**, which are the responsibility of each State currently, and each State makes up its own rules regarding registration.

I have had several enquiries from vets who have graduated in countries that are not recognised for automatic registration in Australia for **vet nursing work** and I did employ 2 of them part time in order to try and help them pass the AVE exam. To my knowledge all have currently given up trying, including one specialist veterinary anaesthetist of 10 years' experience and one small animal practitioner of 10 years' experience because the exam is virtually impossible to pass and very expensive. It is also run only once per year.

Most of these vets are in Australia on student visas, so they are only allowed to work limited hours in usually poorly paid jobs. This makes it very difficult to exist in Australia let alone save for what is a very expensive exam (for reference the Australian exam is about 3-4x the cost of the identical exam in the USA).

Through employing these overseas vets as nurses, I came to realise that there is quite a **large pool of available vets already in Australia** or hoping to come here. If only they could get registered.

The registration process is currently completely broken and needs a complete overhaul. Last year, only 10 vets attempted the exam and only ONE passed, adding a grand total of ONE extra vet to the workforce. In all other academic fields that I have been involved with, a pass rate of 10% is an indication that something is wrong with the exam, not the candidates.

The big problem is that the AVE exam forces candidates to be examined in all facets of Veterinary Science from small animals like dogs and cats, to exotic pets to production animals like sheep, cattle and goats, to equine practice. This sounds like a good idea, but what happens in practice is that almost all graduates of any veterinary school (Australian vets included) tend to concentrate on or specialise in one field of veterinary medicine or other very soon after graduation.

So, for example it is very difficult for someone who has worked with dogs and cats for 10 years to pass the production animal sections of the exam and vice versa for a cattle or sheep vet to pass the small animal section of the exam.

The solution for this is to grant **limited registration** for the vets to work with each species or group of species in the sections they have passed. This then allows them to start work as a vet immediately. They could then go on to attempt the other sections later if they wish to expand their areas of practice.

This helps alleviate the current crisis by providing a quick supply of vets, but also benefits the overseas vets themselves who could then earn a decent wage in order to afford to pay for the remaining parts of the exam. Perhaps even a short-term subsidisation of the initial exam, to be paid back when the vet starts earning might help as well.

Long Term Solutions

The long-term solution is to train LOTS more vets, and maybe to make changes to the type of candidates undertaking Veterinary Science degrees.

The current crisis has been caused by a few factors that have reduced the number of available vet/hours, especially in regional areas.

The high ATAR and the current poor state of the education situation in regional areas after a couple of decades of neo-liberal policy means that a lot of the graduates come from city areas or private schools and they don't want to move to regional areas, or if they do then they generally don't stay.

In the last 20 years about 95% of the graduates have been female. Personally I think it is great to have women represented more in science careers, but it reduces the number of vet/hours available when inevitable career breaks need to be taken for pregnancy and childbirth.

Unfortunately, due to a number of dangers (radiation, drugs, physicality of work and dangerous animals) the profession is not very suitable for pregnant women to continue to work full time. To some extent the risks can be managed around, and I have myself had to design lots of systems for my pregnant workers, but it does reduce the number of productive vet/hours available and this has not been accounted for.

For the most part after childbirth, female veterinarians prefer to work part-time and this is easier in large cities with access to childcare and lots of demand for part time workers. Maybe a shift in culture might help here and as mentioned above I have a vet that has taken extended paternity leave, but this not common, and is a generational cultural change that is probably a decade or two away from making much difference. Again, this reduction in available work hours has not been accounted for by increasing the number of vets being trained.

Another generational factor that has not been accounted for is the change in attitude to work in the younger generation. In many respects this has been a good thing, with much more healthy focus on work/life balance and mental health compared to my much older generation, but the reduction in the number of hours available for work has again not been accounted for by increasing the number of graduates.

When I graduated it was common for new graduates to work 50-60 hours per week and be on call for emergencies out of hours every 2nd or 3rd night. This had all the attendant social problems of isolation, burn out and suicide, so nobody would want to revisit that, but we need to account for the fact that it is now common for graduates to work 38 hours per week or less with no afterhours requirement. In a lot of cases new graduates are cutting their hours down to 26-28 hours to deal with stress of work. We are still getting lots of suicides unfortunately, and hopefully some of these change will help, but it just means less available vet/hours that need to be accounted for.

I realise some of the changes needed are outside of the scope of what State Government can do and will take decades to have an effect, but starting with a better education system in regional areas would be a big help in both recruitment of regional kids into Veterinary Science as a career and later in retention of professional staff in regional areas because a lot of professionals leave regional towns and go back to the city to get a better education for their children when they start having kids.

These are often mid-career professionals so when losing them it is hard to replace that expertise. Maybe one quick fix would be to temporarily increase the ATAR boost for kids in regional/disadvantaged areas. I think it's currently 5 points, but maybe should be 10? This would automatically increase the number of kids from rural/regional schools getting into Veterinary Science and hopefully in 5-10 years, more vets wanting to practice in the regions.

Summary

Short term: change the registration requirements to allow **limited registration** for overseas vets after passing each section of the AVE.

Long term: **train lots more vets** to replace the vet/hours lost due to the above-mentioned factors. Consider increasing the regional/disadvantaged school **temporary uplift in the ATAR** for a short period to get more kids from regional areas into veterinary science courses.

In conclusion, I would like to say thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the enquiry. I realise you will hear from many of the peak industry bodies and perhaps from people with a much more sophisticated viewpoint than me who have been working on the problem for a while, but I thought it was important to give you the view from the ground up as a regional veterinary practice owner (at least as I see it). Please feel free to contact me for any further input.

Kind Regards