

Submission
No 124

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

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 20 July 2023

Partially
Confidential

I have been a practicing vet for nearly 30 years. I have seen a lot of changes to the profession in that time.

The rise of the corporates is one of the biggest changes I have seen. I am yet to be convinced that this is a good thing. The corporates clearly came about because someone saw a way of making a lot of money and turned a profession, with caring for animals at the heart of it, into a capitalist venture designed to line the pockets of often non-veterinary business people, at the expense of those professionals who work day and night in an extremely challenging profession. Certainly, my first experience of working for a corporate many years ago was an immediate reduction in salary, holidays, the introduction of bonus related pay and a considerable increase in fees. We lost swathes of clients overnight. Many of the decisions were made by people completely devoid of any experience of the veterinary industry. This organisation quickly went into administration so lessons will have been learnt. My concern is that the profits of many practices are now siphoned away from the practice to pay the salaries of layers of middle and upper management and shareholders. I am not convinced that the other side of the argument; benefits in terms of buying power, access to shared knowledge, support services etc is a good trade off.

The irony of the situation now, is that with the extreme shortage of vets, we can negotiate for better wages and working conditions, in a profession that up until now has been appallingly remunerated. It is only in the last few years that wages have started to resemble close to what they should be. To sustain ongoing wage increases for all those working in veterinary practice we need to be charging appropriately for our time. Unfortunately, there is a lack of appreciation by members of the public of the true cost of running a veterinary practice. There is very little transparency with regards to differences between practices in terms of standards of care offered so often the fees charged are the measure the public use.

The other thing that I find ludicrous is the lack of wage transparency within the profession, which for far too long has kept everybody in the dark and has limited any ability for individuals to negotiate for better conditions. It is refreshing to finally see hourly rates being advertised on veterinary adverts and again this has only come about due to the high level of competition for vets. Some form of legislation to ensure wage transparency across the board would be useful.

My situation is like many practices around the country. We have 50% fewer vets than 10 years ago. We have had to close our books to new clients, and we are having to turn people away daily to manage the workload. We have been unable to employ any new vets for over 2 years now. It is very rare that we even get applications for the advertised jobs. The on-call situation is very difficult as well, as fewer, and fewer vets are willing to participate in on call and we are in a regional area so have no access to an emergency centre nearby. This puts extra pressure on those vets still doing on call work.

The response of the public to the vet shortage and the limited appointments we have available is oftentimes brutal, which further compounds the daily stresses. There is often no appreciation for amount of work we are trying to do in very difficult circumstances. It is not hard to understand why so many people leave the profession. I think there is an ongoing need to highlight this to the public, so they are made aware of the difficulties faced by many practices especially in regional areas and people especially need to be aware that if pet ownership continues to rise and the workforce shortage is not reversed, that there will be owners that may be unable to access veterinary services, tragic as that is.

The recent shortage of vets is obviously multifactorial. The regional areas have challenges in terms of the on-call requirements and attracting younger people to these areas can be hard due to the different lifestyle compared to the cities. My feeling is that we need a complete overhaul of the way in which applicants are selected for veterinary degrees and to look at aspects of the course to ensure that graduates are practice ready and have a good understanding of what veterinary practice is like. There needs to be an emphasis on making sure applicants are truly aware of the rigours of the job. It is not an easy profession. If regular 9-5 hours are what you are looking for it is not the job for you. It is demanding, stressful, exhausting and not always compatible with an easy family life. Non-veterinary partners may struggle to understand these pressures. Regardless of how much working conditions and wages are changed, the actual nature of the job will be the same. That does not mean it is not a rewarding profession. There is, or there was, plenty about the profession to love. I am a much stronger person for having endured the experiences I have had. I am a much better vet for having done on-call for most of my working life and having had to make difficult decisions under pressure. I have met amazing people and formed very close bonds with my clients. Nothing of worth comes easily or quickly. Having said that the profession today is very different to when I graduated, and I am sorry to say that I would hesitate to currently recommend it as a profession.

What I strongly believe is that it is not the most academic people that necessarily make the best vets, and we urgently need to find a different way of selecting for resilience, adaptability, and a strong work ethic. The current system clearly is not working. We maybe need to consider a more practical based entrance exam. We need to produce graduates who realise that a lot can be achieved in general practice. There seems to be a worrying trend that all surgical cases need to be referred to a specialist surgeon. We also need to attract more men into the profession to try and reduce the dropout rate from women taking career breaks and then returning to the profession in a limited capacity.

The large debt, which encumbers veterinary graduates, is a potential barrier to people considering a veterinary career. It must be extremely hard to be entering a profession with relatively low wages with such a large financial burden. Some form of debt relief for people working in regional areas may be useful to attract people to these areas, as has been advocated by the AVA. Perhaps the large corporate companies could be encouraged to offer some form of debt relief as part of an incentive package for their employees.

The on-call situation in regional areas is becoming more and more of an issue. The animal welfare implications for owners not being able to access emergency treatment out of hours is enormous. I would suggest some form of government incentive in the form of tax relief for those individuals (not businesses) that are still willing to do on call work.