

Submission
No 125

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

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 20 July 2023

Partially
Confidential

NSW Legislative Council – Investigation into the Shortages in the Veterinary Workforce

Terms of Reference

***(a) the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry and pathology**

(b) the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates

*** (c) the burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession**

(d) the role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses

(e) the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians (f) the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services

***(g) the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians**

(h) the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

(i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations

(j) the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others

(k) current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations

***(l) strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practising veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales**

(m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care

(n) any other related matter.

To Whom It May Concern

Please note that I will only be addressing the “Terms of Reference” above that have an asterisk next to them and highlighted in red

My Background:

I am a veterinarian of 33 year’s experience in small animal practice (4 years overseas and 29 years in Australia) . I am currently working as an associate veterinarian for a large Veterinary Company.

I would like to comment on the following terms of reference

a)Shortage of Veterinarians across the profession....

I cannot comment on all the reasons behind these shortages – but I can certainly comment on the reality of the veterinary work force which is perpetuating the shortages.

Small animal practice in Sydney is invariably busy with a mixture of consultations, surgery and emergency care. When veterinarians are sick or take annual leave it is a frequent occurrence that there is no-one to fill their roles. It is extremely difficult to find locum veterinarians or indeed full or part time veterinarians to assist in practices. Those of us still working are perpetually “shouldering the load” which makes it difficult for us to take holidays or sick days. We are frequently unable to take appropriate breaks during the day because there is always ‘something’ that requires a vet’s time, understanding or signature. We usually work 9-10 hour shifts.

There are many vets who leave the profession because they do not like these hours and stress levels and they can seek other forms of employment where they get paid better for a lot less stress. Veterinarians trying to re-enter practice after a break are less likely to do so if they know that they are going to be put into understaffed practices where they are going to be worked relentlessly all day. Many of the overseas veterinarians who seek work in Australia are working as locums because they know they will receive better hourly pay and not have to shoulder as many responsibilities – making it harder and harder to get permanent staff

So in summary, the shortage of veterinarians in small animal practice in Sydney definitely exists and is self-perpetuating. To help alleviate the problem we need to make the profession seem more appealing with better work life balance and better pay rates.

c) The burnout and mental health challenges

Overworked, underpaid vets who get repeated criticism from their clients for not doing a job well enough, or because they supposedly charge too much money for their services – is the cause of burnout and mental health challenges for veterinarians

Vets by nature are very intelligent, caring and compassionate individuals who really do want to do the right things by their clients but sometimes their clients’ expectations are unrealistic and their understanding of the procedures and processes is so poor that they are critical and cannot understand the costs involved and hence blame the veterinarian for what they see as unreasonable expenditure.

The same thing cannot be said for the medical profession because of medical insurance (stopping the costs blowing out) and the fact that a doctor in a human hospital, unlike a veterinarian, is the not the only person that is responsible for everything from the estimate to the anaesthesia, surgery, dentistry, pain relief, appropriate medication and paperwork. In veterinary practice, if there is an error in any of these the veterinarian is automatically deemed responsible. Veterinary nurses are not registered nurses and cannot be held accountable.

The solution to this issue is for better training and accreditation for nurses so that they share some of the burden of responsibility for the procedures and a marketing campaign to help get the general public on board with a better understanding of how difficult many of the procedures on their animals are. In this way there would be a reduction of the workload on vets and a better appreciation for what they do which should help with their mental health

g) The impact of current legislation and regulatory framework on veterinarians

Without a doubt the most soul destroying part about being a senior veterinarian with many years of experience is the fact that my salary is based on the Animal Care and Veterinary Service Award 2020.

My colleagues and I have discussed how unreasonable this is on many occasions. A “ level 4 veterinarian “– someone who has been to university for a least 5 years full time and then been in practice for a further 5-10 years at least with managerial duties – can expect a salary rate of \$43.10/hour. Veterinarians have similar training to human doctors and in many aspects of their role have far more responsibility and yet the award that controls their salary pays them similar or less than that a new graduate would receive when working in an office. And certainly less than half that which an equivalently experienced doctor would earn.

This award also does not recognize any special rates for veterinarians working on the weekends. A vet working on a Sunday is likely to be earning less that the nurse working with them – the nurse is likely being paid double time.

All these regulations are contributing to the anger that vets feel about how undervalued they are and stopping others from joining the veterinary workforce.

l) Strategies to support the current veterinary workforce

a. Marketing – Advertise what a great job vets do and what a misconception there is about veterinary services being “expensive” (and that in fact the average vet does not earn any more than an average wage). I strongly believe that the AVA needs to play a bigger role here.

b. Rewrite that Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award and so that Veterinarians and their trained staff receive pay rates far more appropriate for their education and skill levels.

c. Marketing to encourage owners to take up pet insurance – this will help reduce the general public’s anxiety about vet bills. Again, something the AVA can do to help the profession

If these issues are dealt with, I strongly believe that more vets will stay in the workforce and we will encourage the next generation that this is a good profession to get involved in.