

**Submission  
No 128**

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

**Name:** Dr Andrew Jacotine

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## **Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW**

### **Dr Andrew Jacotine BVSc[hons] M.App.Sci. MANZCVS**

I would like to start my submission by applauding the NSW Parliament for its *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales*.

This is long overdue at State and Federal levels and it is my hope the Victorian Parliament and Australian Government also act on this national crisis.

I am a small animal veterinary practitioner. I own and run a primary and referral veterinary practice, ACE Vet Hospital, in Euroa in regional Victoria. The practice services regional communities of North East Victoria and Southern NSW with routine and emergency care.

I have been a veterinarian in private practice for over 25-years in both mixed practice (small and large animal) and more recently small animal practice. I have worked widely across Victoria and Southern NSW, predominantly in a regional setting.

I stand with my colleagues in NSW – the issues they face are facing veterinary practices nationally.

In the process of writing this I have read through several other submissions, and I am heartened to see they have come from a range of people in the community.

I caution the committee to not be pulled off topic with the breath of submissions. This enquiry is pertaining to the shortage in the veterinary workforce.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) are broad and cover a large section of the known issues in the profession. This is a complex issue and the ToR reflect this. This alone shows progress for me.

This is not a single issue and there is no simple fix.

Veterinary clinics are private businesses that serve a public need. I ask the committee to look at what this public need is and how we – as private practitioners – can meet this need.

My business, along with the majority of regional veterinary businesses, is experiencing a severe workforce shortage. I cannot recruit staff to fill vacant positions and this is forcing me to reduce services.

I feel the public's expectations of the veterinary profession is significantly higher than it is in other sectors.

The public expects to access service when they need them. Of course, this is understandable given the importance of animals in our lives.

However, what this means is individual veterinarians are essentially donating their time to be on call.

The award pays a very small allowance to be on call for 24 hours.

While we are on standby and ready to act, clinics and staff are only paid for services when they are delivered – so when the veterinarian sees a patient.

Clients will call, ask for advice and have the benefit of potential service at no cost.

This sees a small number of highly educated people working or having work commitments for a large percentage of the week, working after hours on their own with little or no back up.

Due to these poor work conditions, the veterinary salary private clinics can afford to pay their staff is very low, relative to the years of education and the workload and responsibility of their veterinary staff.

I encourage the committee to examine these working conditions closely, as well as the remuneration for this work and ask “would I do this? Would I do my job like this or under these conditions”.

In saying this – the problem is far more complex than remuneration.

There is an emotional cost, a mental health cost and a fiscal cost

## **The Problem**

Veterinary clinics across regional Victoria, NSW and Australia are in crisis.

Private practices are being forced to reduce services because they cannot recruit and retain staff.

There are insufficient suitably trained qualified and registered individuals in the job marketplace to employ.

At ACE Vet Hospital in Euroa, we can no longer provide a 24hr/7 days a week service. We have been forced to cease our after-hours care for the foreseeable future.

I have witnessed the complete closure of regional veterinary practices due to the inability to recruit staff. Further exacerbating the pressures on neighbouring veterinary clinics.

This is not a problem that's limited to Euroa, or Victoria. Clinics across NSW are also being forced to stop after-hours care and close their doors.

Attracting veterinarians to regional clinics is a significant challenge, as is retaining these professionals. With many vets relocating to major cities or leaving the profession altogether.

Support is needed to address the shortage of veterinarians in regional Australia to maintain the viability of regional practices, which provide a crucial service to regional communities.

The industry has one of the highest attrition rates with a five-year average time in profession after graduation. Given it takes on average 6-7 years to graduate as a veterinarian, we are losing professionals faster than we are training them.

Studies show up to 30 per cent are considering abandoning practice in the next 12 months.

With 24/7 on call, long hours are common and expected. This contributes to stress, anxiety, and poor work conditions.

The industry has the highest suicide rate of any profession.

Vets are about four times as likely to take their own life than the general Australian population and twice as likely as healthcare workers.

One vet will die by suicide every 12 weeks, figures from the Australian Veterinary Association show.

Additionally, the loss of veterinary services in regional towns will see a decline in animal welfare, restrict disease surveillance and response to an exotic disease outbreaks such as foot-and-mouth disease.

It will also contribute to a loss of jobs in regional Australia.

Animal owners will be forced to travel long distances, and potentially to metro areas, for after-hours services.

We are asking government to bring attention to this crisis, and work with the industry to increase the supply of vets for employment.

### **What is our goal?**

In the short term we must find ways to increase the supply of veterinary professionals to regional areas.

This will help with attrition rates, along with immediate levels of stress, and poor working conditions.

In the long term there needs to be investment in the industry that matches demand.

We need to think about a new veterinary model that is more sustainable for its practitioners.

The long hours required to provide this critical service cannot continue.

We need an industry that will allow individuals to achieve their life goals.

To do this we must promote career longevity and succession planning, personal development and other life goals (family, housing, travel, education).

We know the basic issues:

- insufficient supply
- increased demand.
- increased loss rate.

I urge this enquiry to investigate why these issues are occurring, so we can drive positive change and effective long term solutions can be determined.

This is not a time to reduce standards, increase competition or place additional strain on the already stretched industry.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission. I am happy to provide any further information or discuss any points.