

Submission
No 132

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: VetChat
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Veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

VetChat - July 2023

Dr Claire Jenkins
Veterinarian, Founder and CEO VetChat

VetChat - telehealth for pets

VetChat provides telehealth for pets. Our mission is to improve access to quality Vet care, to better support carers, their pets, and Vets. Early intervention and prevention leads to better pet health outcomes.

Founded by a Veterinarian in 2017, VetChat connects pet carers directly to experienced Australian registered Vets online, within minutes. Our established business has grown rapidly, and has helped over 70 thousand pet carers to date, and continues to deliver on operational excellence to Vets, partners & pet carers.

VetChat now employs thirty-nine (39) Veterinarians across Australia, with six (6) in New South Wales. VetChat also directly partners with fifty (50) Veterinary clinics to provide after hours triage service. Ten (10) of these are in NSW, all located regionally - everywhere from Albury to Brunswick Heads.

Overview: Dr Claire Jenkins

I appreciate the chance to contribute to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales.

I've been a Veterinarian for over 18 years and I have seen firsthand countless cases, where the delay in getting Veterinary advice resulted in poorer pet health outcomes. For most pet

carers, the knowledge gap is huge. For many pet carers who are relying on in-clinic advice only, particularly when clinics are closed, often experience delayed or improper care for pets.

As the founder and CEO of VetChat, I can comment on the case that Veterinarians in New South Wales (and all over Australia) are caring for more pets, with fewer Vets. We are in an industry crisis with a Vet shortage made worse by after hours fatigue and burnout, causing many to leave the profession entirely. It's a vicious cycle for those who remain in the profession, and unless there is substantial positive change to support our Vets soon, there will be continued detrimental impact to households.

Demand for Vet services has skyrocketed due to the pet adoption boom and Vet shortage. Many Veterinary clinics cannot meet the increased demand and have had to stop accepting new patients. The struggle to hire staff has only exacerbated this problem.

As a result, pet carers have to wait longer to secure appointments. 6 hour waits in emergency centres, and waiting over a week for routine appointments, are both commonplace experiences for pet carers. By the time a week has passed, non urgent issues become more urgent, and we know that emergency centres are seeing an increase in many conditions that could have been prevented with earlier care.

VetChat's commentary below relates to all Inquiry terms of reference (a) - (n), excluding (d), and (e).

1. 24/7 veterinary services to better support pets and Vets

VetChat supports pet carers, Veterinarians and Veterinary clinics in urban, regional, and rural New South Wales.

Pet carers

VetChat is a service that provides families peace of mind, by connecting pet carers to trusted Aussie registered Veterinarians online within minutes, 24/7.

For most pet-carers, the knowledge gap is huge. Issues out of hours can be scary and stressful for carers and their pets, and there are often ways to manage them at home. It's estimated that less than 30% of after-hours calls are genuine emergencies².

With Vet tele-triage, a pet carer can describe or show their pet's issue, and learn what needs to be done. Whether it's managed at home, until their Vet opens; or right away local referral is needed.

Online Vet access helps reduce the barriers to access in veterinary healthcare that can prevent individuals from obtaining the necessary care for their animals.

Veterinary clinics

Vet clinics use Vet tele-triage as a way to manage the workload of Veterinarians out of regular hours. Tele-triage positively supports Veterinarians and clinics who provide after hours care with a triage system that will reduce after hours stress and unnecessary call outs. Reduces interruptions and time spent on calls so Vets can focus on delivering patient care when needed, and getting rest when not.

We know that having 24/7 Vet triage has been used as a recruitment tool for clinics that provide 24/7 out of hours access to care, and is a support system for new graduate veterinarians who are providing on call.

The addition of a Vet led tele-triage has reduced the number of calls² and associated stress enabling clinics to continue to provide out of hours access, over the unwanted alternative of reducing or eliminating after hours access to their vets.

Veterinarians

Tele-triage enables flexible work-from-home options for veterinarians. There's an increasing need for flexible work options, and telehealth provides an additional revenue stream for Vets outside of clinic work, enabling financial return for when Vets can't be in the clinic such as when family or personal circumstances don't allow. Most of our Vets work both in the clinic and online.

2. Veterinarian wellbeing

After-hours work is recognised as a significant contributing factor to stress for vets working in clinical practice. As little as one extra working hour per week can increase suicidal thoughts by nearly 2%¹.

Clinics providing their own after hours care are undoubtedly under stress, and working more hours than previously. Many are struggling due to the burden of after-hours work. One example is a VetChat partner clinic in NSW, where initially six veterinarians shared after-hours care, alongside their regular full-time work hours. However, due to the stress experienced by the vets, the clinic ended up with only two veterinarians to shoulder the same workload. This story is common, and is not sustainable for Vets individually or as small businesses.

To further compound matters, fewer Veterinary practices are participating in after-hours consultations which is bringing undue and unreasonable pressure on those clinics who continue to provide out of hours and weekend services. Some clinics have come to the heartbreaking decision to close their after hours offering for the survival of their clinic and staff. This leaves patients in a difficult position of who to call - likely the nearest on call Vet, who is already overworked with their own clients.

Often clinics may refuse non-clients for after hours care. This is a requirement many have had to impose to ensure that the Vets who are servicing the after hours clients are not

overloaded, to protect against their staff being forced to leave the profession due to burnout. Saying no to a critical pet is the last thing a Vet wants to do. In this situation, many suffer from additional anguish, stress and guilt, even when it's for their own personal survival in the profession.

Clients may be left to travel to the nearest 24/7 operating facility, which can mean hours transport for critical pets, prolonging their suffering, and the mental anguish of their carers trying to secure care. There is also negative feedback to the local clinic for not being available, further placing stress on the Vet and staff, who suffer when pets do.

3. Care provision for lost or stray animals, and injured wildlife

As a rule, clinics generally provide care for wildlife and lost and stray animals during regular hours at their own expense. Out-of-hours care however, when the veterinary clinic is not open, is a more challenging situation. Wildlife carers and council rangers are often unavailable at night. Currently, the public largely expect local veterinarians to be the first point of contact for such care or assistance, and to absorb all costs associated with the care.

This adds further load to Veterinary clinics and veterinary practitioners providing out-of-hours care, and many clinics now have protocols in place that prevent them from treating lost or stray animals and injured wildlife during those times. These protocols are in place to protect practitioners from further burnout - so that they can continue to have Vets to provide out-of-hours care to their clients.

Consequently, members of the public or good samaritans are left to search for temporary housing or travel longer distances to find available care. Some may even leave the animal in a box or other makeshift arrangement on clinic grounds, waiting for the nearest clinic to open in the morning. These circumstances create an unfortunate and stressful situation for both the vet, the individuals involved, and of course, the animal.

4. Public education

In line with the recommendation for a public education campaign made below VetChat is well positioned to advise on and support the delivery of an education program to raise awareness of the benefits and costs of veterinary care. This would be best focused on the costs associated with after-hours care in the context of the importance of prevention and early intervention of issues.

This initiative would support clinic Vets to spend time more efficiently on cases that need them, and less on those that don't. Additionally it would allow pet carers to easily access the right advice to make educated decisions about the care of their pets and not spend unnecessarily on more expensive consults for non-urgent issues.

5. Recommendations

VetChat proposes the importance of the following to contribute to a sustainable Veterinary profession:

- NSW wide access to Vet provided tele-triage for pets and farm animals to protect Veterinarians from unnecessary calls out-of-hours and to ensure access to experts for pet carers and pets. The government must provide a mechanism of support to financially protect veterinary practitioners, particularly in regional and remote areas, and should contribute to triage costs out of hours which are needed for the public good.
- The allowance for tele-medicine to provide emergency medication to pets who can't access care in person, does require the removal of regulatory barriers. Regulatory reform around digital innovation in veterinary health must be a priority - with a review and implementation of updated regulations and frameworks that support and foster advancements in technology within the veterinary field. Such reforms aim to strike a balance between ensuring the welfare and safety of animals while promoting innovation, efficiency, and improved access to veterinary care.
- The NSW government takes responsibility and allocates funding for round-the-clock care, triage and guidance to the public for lost, stray, and homeless animals, as well as injured wildlife, on a daily basis and during emergency situations.
- Public education campaigns to ensure the public are aware of the realities of the costs of care, and the responsibilities of prevention and early intervention in disease. Campaigns to share the good news stories of what Vets achieve every day in addition to the awareness of stresses faced.
- Veterinary service standards imposed by the government must provide a mechanism of support to financially protect veterinary practitioners

References

1. Bartram DJ et al (2009). Psychosocial working conditions and work-related stressors among UK veterinary surgeons, *Occup Med* 59(5): 334-341
2. Vet Times. 'Vets and VNs say most OOH calls not emergencies'. Sept 2021. Available at <https://www.vettimes.co.uk/news/vets-and-vns-say-most-oo-h-calls-not-emergencies/>.