

Submission
No 133

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

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 21 July 2023

Partially
Confidential

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry into the veterinary shortage in NSW.

My wife and I run a mixed animal practice on a property near the small town (population 1300) of (Withheld) in the north west of NSW. We have both been vets for 22 years and in that time have seen a number of changes to the industry.

It is certainly a difficult profession and there are many things that we are expected to be an expert in when providing the services for a mixed practice. From colics to calvings, from collapsed dogs to comminuted fractures and everything in-between. The mental strain is significant and the case load is varied and relentless. In my time as a vet I have seen 3 new vet schools appear and yet there is still a shortage of vets, especially in rural areas and I guess this inquiry has been created to find out why. I have limited knowledge of urban practice so my points will always generally relate to rural mixed animal practice.

These are my thoughts on the rural vet shortage:

1. The Mental Load

Our practice will not necessarily reflect all rural practices. Some are larger with more vets, but I am seeing a rise in the number of small practices run by just the one vet. Wages are not in line with other professions and we have to know a shit-load of stuff so it is only natural that vets want to work for themselves rather than earning for someone else. However, the mental strain is very significant. Our job is difficult, and with advancements in diagnostic and treatment capabilities, much more onus has been placed on the vet to, firstly, find the problem, and then solve the problem, within a tight budget. This probably goes against the common perception that better equipment leads to a better, easier, and happier workplace. There are many instances in our day where that is true, however, more gear means more expense that must be passed on to clients and more responsibility to be an expert in yet another aspect of the job – medicine, surgery, ultrasound, radiology, and interpretation of blood results to name a few. Rural and remote practices like ours do not have much capability to refer cases to specialists due to the distances people must travel. Our closest registered small animal specialists would be in Brisbane, Gold Coast, and Sydney, a minimum of 6 hours drive (closer for horses, Scone is only 3.5hrs away). Specialist fees are very high and even if clients could go, often funds are limiting. We are often then lumped with attempting to treat a case that we might refer if we were in an urban setting, and this adds to the stress of trying to achieve a positive outcome for the patient but also in charging and collecting a fee for a service we perform that we might not be totally confident at doing. This is not unusual, it is every day of our lives. Trying to tap a retro-bulbar abscess via ultrasound-guided needle, trying to screw back on a small peri-articular chip fracture, or trying to remove a tumour with good margins but which is precariously placed next to vital areas. Clients do not want to euthanase their pets for treatable condition that they cannot afford, they just look at us and expect we will find a solution. In a small town, everyone knows us and this makes it very hard to not always be accommodating.

2. After hours and On-Call

Our practice is on-call all the time, like most rural practices. However, unlike larger practices in the country, we have just the 2 vets that can do emergencies, my wife and myself, so that means we are always on-call. Every night, every weekend, forever. There really isn't much scope to employ another full-time vet (if you could find one, which you can't) to help with after-hours but we would see between 1 and 10 people on a weekend, and there wouldn't be a week go by without an emergency on one or two nights of the week, or a 6am wake up with someone knocking on your door. Add to this the constant calls and text messages looking for "advice" (which is what we charge for during hours) and it becomes exhausting. I could never look a young vet or vet-student in the eye and tell them that mixed practice is a wonderful life. You don't see this aspect on the TV vet programs. Just the phone ringing or the "ding" of a text message is quite anxiety-inducing for many vets who do after hours work. For the money we get, it is hardly worth it. Even in a larger practice where you are on-call one in 5 or 6 weekends, it just doesn't seem worth it. It's never nice to be on-call, to have that feeling that when the phone rings, your next few hours could be gone. Kids sporting events, birthday parties, dinner with friends, a trip to the pool, even holiday plans can be shelved for answering that one phone call. One morning I remember we were supposed to leave for a 3 night break on the coast. The kids were packed and ready. A farmer called with a cow having trouble calving. We told him we were leaving for holidays in a few minutes and could he call another practice. He called back 20 mins later and asked could he borrow some calving gear because he couldn't get anyone to come. I went to this call out and the kids had to wait at home. When I arrived back my wife had a dog on the surgery table under anaesthetic and she was removing a bladder stone the size of a plum from a 4kg poodle. It just makes you want to scream. We did get away eventually this time, but there have been many holidays where there is only one parent taking the kids. If we didn't provide the service, someone else would have to. It would just shift the burden to another clinic, or the owners would choose to not do anything. It is a growing trend in our industry to just block your ears to the noise and hope someone else hears it and deals with it. Put your prices up and that will stop some people coming. Turn your phone off and they will have to find another option. All the while knowing that either someone else had to step up when they were tired and needed a break, or the animal just suffered and no-one treated it. I don't blame any vet for doing it, we just can't work all the time. We have turned our phones off at times when we were just exhausted. It should be ok to do so but our society demands we have 24/7 emergency care available.

3. Providing care to lost, stray or injured animals

Personally, this does not cause a large burden for our clinic. It happens often but not at huge expense to us. If this is your biggest deterrent from being a vet, I think you've never had to do any hard work in your life. Other areas may cop more wildlife which could be a burden but for us it doesn't even rate more than a passing mention

4. Effects of the shortage on welfare

At this point I don't believe animal welfare has suffered due to the shortage of vets. That is only because those of us left are working harder to get to everyone. Animal welfare in this country is of a very high standard, as it should be.

5. Barriers to access to veterinary care

There have always been barriers in rural and remote areas. Some people just live a long way away and travel costs are significant. However, like all costs, veterinary fees are rising.

Emergency clinics are now charging in the thousands, rather than the hundreds, of dollars. I don't begrudge any business charging what it needs to stay open and viable. However, there is definitely a growing proportion of people for whom veterinary care is unaffordable. As callous as this might sound, I think vets are just tired of the emotional tug-of-war between pet/livestock treatment and the subsequent invoice. I'm sure it happens in all industries but one that deals with living beings probably cops this the most. I don't want to euthanase everything because the cost is too high, but I also want to get paid properly for the service. This struggle is definitely a real one. There is a massive amount of pro-bono work going on in vet practices to help people afford treatment.

6. The changing demographic of the profession

Many have commented on the current gender imbalance. There are vastly more females entering the profession than males. I do not think this has any bearing whatsoever on the current issues. Our region is full of strong, intelligent, hard-working women who are out there every day solving complex cases and matching it up physically with their male counterparts. If they have to work part-time or reduced hours to take care of kids, it's because their husbands won't do it, and our culture says that that's ok. There's nothing I can do that my wife can't, but there's plenty she can do that I can't. Focusing on this as an issue would be distracting from the real problems facing our industry. Female vets are awesome, full-stop.

Burn-out is real. The mental strain is real. It's relentless and it takes a special person to survive in this environment. University debt forgiveness by governments to get new graduates into rural areas won't work. That doesn't change what the job is. There is a shortage of vets not because we aren't graduating enough vets, not because most of the graduates are women, and not due to their university debts. It's because the job is really really difficult to be good at, and whilst you're getting good at it, it can become so draining and so stress-inducing that you leave or move to an easier job. We wake up every day and deal with cases that we have never dealt with before. Things we have to look up in books, research, ring other vets about. It's exhausting. All the while, the income received is not enough to send your kids to a good school. Whilst I would really love to sing the praises of the rural public education system, anyone who can send their kids away, will do so. The education system is broken and when young couples start having families, it becomes a real factor where you choose to raise your family. We have had a multitude of new doctors come and go from our town over the last 15 years, and not one of them has had a school-aged child that attended our school, and when their kids were old enough, they left. Many vets in the country are married to a farmer of some sort (cropping or grazing cattle/sheep). If it weren't for that fact, there would be a lot less vets in rural areas. That's not a sustainable way to maintain an industry. If we want vets in rural areas, and I'm assuming we do, sustainability must start with profitability. We can't work 24/7 for the same money as someone who works 9-5 in a low stress occupation. I'm not trying to say we deserve more than the average person because we're vets, it's just a simple equation of risk vs reward. No-one who isn't in some way mad, would bother to do the job for the reward we get. Government cannot do a lot about the cost of running a vet business but they can increase the revenue of all small businesses by decreasing the tax we pay. If the rewards are higher, more people will choose to do it.

Without getting too philosophical, and I'm aware this submission has probably already gone too far, we have built a culture where important things like free health care and a good education are considered a human right. Certainly medical care at least is considered free, as if it doesn't cost anything. We have championed a culture that has rewarded mediocrity in the workplace with high

wages, devalued education and skills for the sake of a high standard of living for everyone. How is this relevant to the shortage of vets? The wage difference between a vet, who is highly educated and skilled, versus someone who has no formal training or skill, is not broad enough, and in many cases, there is no difference in wage at all. For the mental strain, difficulty of the job, anxiety levels reached, there is no incentive for anyone to stay in the job. We are graduating plenty of vets each year but we are not retaining them because it is not worth it for their mental or financial well-being. Plain and simple.

What can be done about it? I really don't have many great answers to this because the reality is that the issues that underlay why less and less people want to work as a rural vet go much deeper than just how many after-hours calls you get on a weekend, or what your salary is. We have slowly and insidiously developed a culture that no longer has value for those who are highly trained or highly skilled. Those who are not, often through no fault of their own, are remunerated more or less the same. Just legislating for increased wages for vets will not work and could possibly be detrimental. The cost of running a vet business is already too high for smaller rural practices, wages need to be commensurate with earning capacity and profitability of the business. The vet industry is market-driven so we can't just legislate for higher wages. One of the answers I can see for rural veterinary practice and all rural small business is through tax breaks. This is the only change that government has influence over that might actually make a difference to rural veterinary practice. Possibly also subsidised wages for employee vets would help but it opens a can of worms in terms of many other rural occupations where we are struggling to attract workers. There's a lot of time in training a new vet to be competent in all the aspects of mixed practice. Time spent with a new grad equals lost earnings and more costs through longer surgery times, more equipment and materials used. A subsidy would have to be serious though, like 50% of a new graduate's wage.

In summary, despite the bleak picture painted here, there is a lot about the job that is rewarding and enjoyable. I am grateful for the opportunities my job has afforded me and the skills I have learned. I'm very proud of what I can do and of the business we have created, but it just doesn't seem enough to keep vets in the industry. As mentioned previously, the job is REALLY difficult and you will never know everything there is to know. I'd love it if things always went well and every animal had a great outcome at no cost. I'd love it if I could get easy access to help on complex cases. I'd love it if I was rewarded better financially and we were comfortable enough that our kids could go to a good school. I'd love it even more if public education was good enough that we didn't even need to contemplate sending our kids away. I'd love it if there were more opportunities for our kids in the country other than a junior rugby league team in the next town 40km away and a karate class once a week. I'd love it if when we were sick we could go to our local medical centre with confidence and not have to drive hours away to a bigger centre to see a competent doctor. I'd love it if I didn't have to take a day off every time a car needed servicing or a child needed to go to the dentist. I'd love it if when our kids were a bit younger there was long day care and after-school care so we could get our work done on time. I'd love it if when we went to the local shops we didn't have to have 10 stops to talk to everyone about their animals and what medication they might be running out of. Most of all, though, I'd love it we could just turn the phone off and spend some time with our kids before they leave home.

Recently a local human nurse said to us that she was discussing the vet job with a colleague and neither of them could think of ANYTHING about our job that we wouldn't love. This is a person who also regularly rings and texts for advice or to just pick up some medication after hours. People have no idea what the job entails. They think it's all happy days and counting your money in the bank. It's comments like those that make you want to just close the business down.

Thank you for spending the time to read this lengthy and somewhat emotional submission. The answer lies in improving conditions, and livelihoods for rural and remote professionals and others with high level skills. That is the only way to attract these people to these areas. I'm sure an inquiry like this has already been conducted in the human medical field. They certainly haven't solved their rural issues. Dentists would be the same. I wish you the best of luck in formulating a solution. In the meantime, we will carry on doing the best we can.

Yours sincerely,

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