

Submission
No 135

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

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 21 July 2023

Partially
Confidential

To the Committee,

Thank-you for undertaking this inquiry and accepting submissions.

As a registered veterinarian (living in NSW, working remotely, but registered in Vic) who graduated over 20 years ago, I have seen the profession change a great deal. I am no longer in clinical veterinary practice, but have moved into academic research and government roles that utilise my veterinary skills. My reasons for leaving the clinical side of the veterinary profession lay primarily in my strong desire to work in animal health at the population level focusing on wildlife and conservation. I discovered that clinical veterinary roles are primarily customer service focused and individual-based medicine was not my passion.

I have addressed some of the Terms of Reference, as requested, below:

1. That Portfolio Committee 4 – Regional NSW inquire into and report on the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales, and in particular:

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

- There is a shortage of training opportunities for many veterinary specialties including pathology, so veterinarians will relocate overseas for training and certification.

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

- The "corporatisation" of the veterinary profession (i.e. veterinary clinic businesses being bought and run by corporate bodies rather than owner operator) is an enormous change and a significant challenge. Veterinarians, and nurses, did not train to become corporate staff members. They trained to care for animals and practice good medicine and welfare. They resent the corporate expectation of profit targets and being micromanaged in their clinical decision making by managers focused on making money. I hate to think how much money these big companies are making, at the expense of veterinarian and nurse job satisfaction, and at huge expense to clients who are paying inflated costs for care. I think the lack of regulation of corporate investment in the profession has been a huge oversight and has caused irreparable damage to the profession (in some areas it is almost impossible to work for anyone other than the "big corporates"). It has most definitely led to people leaving the profession.

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

- The ethical challenge of providing high quality veterinary care to a client base that primarily expect low cost outcomes is enormous. Veterinarians are constantly being pressured to perform their job at a compromised rate of expenditure, which reduces job satisfaction and animal welfare outcomes. Veterinarians are expected to be counsellors for their clients on top of their medical decision making, and the resulting compassion fatigue is a very real and draining element of the job.

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

- The low pay rate for veterinary nurses is unacceptable.

(e) the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians

- More support is required to enable appropriate levels of medical care to be practiced by overseas trained veterinarians (e.g. funding for training courses both online and practical).

(f) the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services

- After hours care applies significant personal pressure on veterinarians (and sometimes nurses). The stress of being constantly available, and being unsupported after hours, is enormous and unreasonable. However, animal health and welfare concerns will compel veterinarians to perform under this pressure until they can no longer sustain it. Having a phone service to triage cases can be helpful, and it would be helpful to make it standard practice that a vet must be supported after hours by a nurse or another veterinarian if required. Some veterinary clinics rely on their neighbouring practices to provide after hours care and they do not provide any compensation for this, and that should not be considered appropriate. Vets must be given more time off in the roster to account for the stress of after hours.

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

- no comment

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

- After hours pressures are more severe in regional, rural and remote practice and there must be efforts to provide more support. Perhaps a 24-hr professional phone line where vets can ask for clinical advice for experienced veterinarians?

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

- Veterinarians are expected to provide services to stray animals and wildlife free of charge. This is not sustainable and must be addressed. Animal welfare is compromised because these animals are often not attended to or prioritised unless paying clients/owned animals have been seen. There must be financial support for this treatment as an act of charity. The expectation of veterinary involvement in emergencies is often not accompanied by appropriate training or remuneration and this must be addressed in "peace-time" with appropriate laws, frameworks and networks.

(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

- veterinary clinics are increasingly unable to attend to animals, including wildlife, due to staff shortages. Animals are most definitely suffering due to this shortage, because they may wait for many hours/days to be seen, or their care is suboptimal when they are seen due to overloaded clinicians who are too busy.

(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

- ensure legislation enables remote diagnosis and prescribing via video/telehealth.

(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

- Veterinarians and nurses require fast and open access to high-quality, free mental health support from trained professionals that understand the challenges they face. Veterinary profession mentoring programs must be more formalised across the country and funding support to enable mentor/mentee interaction would be extremely valuable.

(m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care

- consider veterinary services provided to stray animals and wildlife as a tax deduction for the veterinarian or the business i.e. these are charitable donations.

(n) any other related matter

Thank you for your consideration of these matters.