

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Dr Deborah Neutze

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Mark Banasiak MLC
Chair, Portfolio Committee No 4 – Regional NSW, NSW Legislative Council

Dear Mr Banasiak MLC,

RE: Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortage in New South Wales

I welcome the invitation to make a submission to this inquiry and thank the committee for looking into this important matter.

I am not representing any organisation. My submission and the opinions and solutions provided are offered as an individual.

About myself

I am currently a registered NSW veterinarian (retired from clinical practice) and Chair of the ACT Veterinary Practitioners Board (VPB).

I have the following experience which is relevant to the issues that the Committee is looking to gain an understanding of:

- I was the previous owner of three veterinary practices in lower socioeconomic areas of Sydney for over 25 years.
- I have previously undertaken workforce analyses and modelling projects for the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)
- I am currently a member of the AVA's steering committee working on a new industry lead Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework.
- As part of the above committee, I am working on a project, called Cultivating Safe Teams, to address psychosocial hazards in the veterinary workplace.
- As the Chair of the ACT VPB, I have mediated discussions between all ACT veterinary practices to look at ways they could work together to address workforce issues that were likely to lead to no emergency veterinary services being available to Canberra residents.
- I oversaw the development of the AVA's national New Graduate Mentoring scheme.
- I instigated and developed the first Return to Work program for veterinarians.
- I prepared resources for the AVA's Veterinary Business Group including around Work Health and Safety, psychosocial hazards and biosecurity guidelines.
- I was an invited member of the Financial Sustainability Board of the Veterinary School of the University of Sydney.
- I have reviewed and prepared a report for the AVA on the Veterinary legislation across all jurisdictions in Australia.
- I led the development of the AVA's Key Recommended Principles of Veterinary Legislation.
- I have represented the AVA at Fair Work hearings into the Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award

- I co-authored a paper on disclosure of disability or misconduct in veterinary graduate registration: balancing confidentiality, equity, and stakeholder interests.

As someone who has for many years worked and advocated for a strong and sustainable veterinary workforce, I have provided some recommendations here that I believe will ensure the effective use of taxpayer funds and will prioritize the well-being of the veterinary workforce.

My submission focuses on a few areas which I consider need emphasis.

Why it is essential that we have a sustainable effective veterinary workforce?

- **Veterinarians are essential workers** During the COVID pandemic it very quickly become obvious that while veterinarians were not listed as essential workers in legislation, they were essential. Every state and territory declared them as essential. Not only those working on our food producing animals are essential, but also those who attend to pets who are living in close contact with families, with both the physical and mental health of the members of the family at risk when they could not access health care for their pets.
- **Biosecurity risks are increasing.** Australia is currently facing more significant biosecurity threats than ever before. These risks are being driving by increasing global travel and trade; and changing climate conditions. We have Foot and Mouth Disease, Rabies, Lumpy Skin Disease and other major diseases that will be devastating for Australia, on our doorstep. Without an effective veterinary workforce, identification of an incursion is likely to be delayed and an effective response nearly impossible.
- **The public demands access to appropriate veterinary care for animals.** Anyone only needs to look at the footage of any recent NSW emergency, including floods and fires, to see the strength of the human animal bond, many people deferring leaving areas where they are personally at risk until they can take their pets/animals with them. Already, animal owners are experiencing long delays when trying to get appointments in order to secure the care they need for their pets. More animal owners are going to be told “Emergency care cannot be guaranteed for your animals right now. There are simply not enough people to take care of all the sick animals” and they will not put up with this situation.

Current situation

As other submissions will have outlined, there are many key indicators that show that the veterinary workforce is currently facing increasing pressures, with demand and attrition rates outstripping supply. [Kookaburra Veterinary Employment](#) one of the main sites where veterinary jobs are advertised is presently reporting that the average time for practices to find a veterinarian is over 8 months, and over 12 months for rural or outer metropolitan practices. There have been closures of significant hospitals in rural areas as they have been unable to find employees.

The cause for the current shortages is complex. One of the most significant contributing factors is attrition. It has been reported that over 25% of recent graduates are saying they are intending to leave clinical practice within the next 5 years.

Over the last few years there has been an increased demand for companion animal veterinary services. While there has been reports of increased pet ownership following COVID lockdowns and people working from home, most of the increase demand is stemming from an increased demand for services for each patient. Client expectations are that their pet will be treated like every other member of their family and as such they want all the diagnostic and treatment alternatives as for humans. Often these new services are costly and time consuming to provide. Owners find it difficult to understand why they are expensive, as their experience in human health is that the equivalent services are cheaper or free as they are paid for by Medicare rebates.

Increasing demand and expectation of owners, impacts on veterinarians in an already highly stressful job. Veterinarians always worked long, unsociable hours. Many vets used to put up with this for several years after graduating, with the goal of getting into a partnership in the practice and then being able to be financially stable and cut back their hours a little. Now, with more corporatisation of practices, it is not the normal expectation that the veterinarian will become practice owners, and as such they are unwilling to work these long hours. Many are also changing to part-time work (previous AVA workforce reports have shown around 30% of the profession works part-time and this is increasing) or moving to non-clinical roles in the search for work-life balance, higher incomes, or less stressful working environments. This is creating a domino effect with less vets to do more work putting pressure on those that remain in clinical practice, and therefore more and more continue to leave.

Once a veterinarian leaves clinical practice it is difficult to reskill to return to practice. While the AVA has developed a program to assist veterinarians in gaining up to date knowledge, it is still difficult for them to find appropriately supervised veterinary practice to regain clinical and surgical skills and to regain their confidence in these areas.

Workforce issues also exist in veterinary nursing. Practices report that finding a skilled veterinary nurse is extremely difficult. While large numbers of people are currently training through Registered Training Organisations the retention of these nurses is a problem. Veterinary nurse attrition has always been notoriously high, due to low pay and limited career progression.

Veterinarians provide a significant amount of public good without payment. Under the **NSW Veterinary Practice Regulation 2013** veterinarians must not refuse to provide relief of pain or suffering to an animal in their presence, this includes wildlife and stray animals. This is a legal requirement even when there is no possibility of recovering costs. Under Part 10 of the **NSW Companion Animal Act 1998** funds gained from registering pets are deposited into the Companions Animals Fund, these funds are then to be used by Councils for the management and control of companion animals. However, most councils rely on veterinarians to assist with this

management, by taking in and treating strays, particularly injured strays without paying them for their services. While many wildlife and rescue care services receive government funded, veterinarians in general practices are often the ones actually treating the wildlife either at cost or for no payment.

Data available on the veterinary workforce in NSW is poor. The AVA has attempted to undertake workforce surveys, however these have a poor response rate. The data collected by the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board needs to be interpreted carefully. The data that they collect through the annual returns that veterinarians must fill in when reregistering each year does not take into account the actual number of hours worked in by each registered veterinarian in clinical practice. i.e., full time equivalents. For instance, I am currently registered in NSW and do not work in clinical practice at all. Many other veterinarians who are not currently practicing remain registered so as to avoid issues with regaining their registration after time off and as stated above a lot of veterinarians are moving to working part-time. The data collected around reasons for deregistering is too limited; there is no indication of the number of responses that they have received. Many veterinarians who are not currently practicing remain registered as to avoid issues with regaining their registration at a later date and this will impact both the number registered and limit the data collected around who is leaving clinical practice.

Potential solutions to consider:

There is no single recommendation that will alone address this important issue facing the veterinary profession.

- Veterinary nurse regulation. This will allow veterinary nurses to be upskilled and take on some of the roles presently undertaken by vets, while still continuing to have veterinary oversight to ensure animal welfare is maintained. This is supported by veterinary nurses and veterinary practices. It will also help with addressing some of the issues with veterinary nurse retention as it will increase career progression and recognise their value.
- Making sure veterinarians are recognised in legislation as essential workers on an ongoing basis.
- There needs to be consideration of how veterinarians are recompensed for the public good they currently perform for free. The **NSW Companion Animal Act 1998** should be reviewed to ensure Councils are responsible for the care of stray companion animals 24 hours a day. If they do not have facilities to do this, they need to have written agreements with their local veterinarians to recompense them for any work undertaken, including first-aid, euthanasia if necessary, transport to council facilities, housing and feeding of all strays as required.
- Better data needs to be collected. The NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board needs to be able to collect data relating to hours worked in clinical practice and type of work undertaken in the Annual Return completed by veterinarians at the time of re-registration. Animal ownership data should be included in the Australian Census.
- A thorough Review of the **Veterinary Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award 2020** particularly addressing the lack of penalty rates for veterinarians and the low level of remuneration for more experienced veterinarians.
- Return to work clinical and surgical skill taught through the universities.

Some things that won't work and why:

- Deregulation of restricted act of veterinary science. Victoria has no restricted acts of veterinary science, and they have the same veterinary workforce shortages. They have recently been considering re-introducing restricted acts due to animal welfare concerns.
- Streaming at universities to teach rural practice and small animal practice separately. This will reduce the mobility of the profession across practice types (i.e. companion animal, rural, equine practice, government etc) and this would put even more pressure on the workforce.
- More veterinary schools – increasing the domestic intake and the financial sustainability of the current universities should be the first consideration. Australian veterinary schools are already finding it difficult if not impossible in some areas to find enough academics to teach at the current universities. More sharing of resources particularly academics across schools should be further investigated.
- Increasing intake without addressing attrition – training veterinary students is very expensive and takes 5-7 years for any increases to impact workforce numbers. Attending to the issues as to why veterinarians are not seeing clinical practice as being a sustainable lifelong career is essential. Without addressing retention issues, increasing intake will be just filling a bucket which has multiple holes in the bottom; it will not fix the problem.

Thank you once again for the invitation to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortage. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you would like further information about my reports to Parliament or would like me to appear as a witness for this inquiry.