

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

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Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in NSW.

For the past few years, there has been much discussion, research, and acknowledgement that the profession of veterinary medicine is experiencing a multitude of problems. It is apparent that there are many reasons for this decline in the industry and that the problem is multifaceted, complicated, and challenging. It is also urgent. The profession struggles with the current workload, the financial balance between costs, wages and profit, and the social requirements of animal and human welfare.

To answer a problem of this magnitude requires a considered approach, with the collection of data such as the submissions given to this inquiry, the development of a variety of solutions, and the creation of answerable KPIs. This sort of work should be undertaken by a working group of a selection of professionals and should involve the AVA and the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board, as well as other key individuals. There is an advantage to making this a national board, or at least reciprocating feedback with other states. The composition of this working group would include veterinarians but may also involve business advisers, HR consultants and similar specialists.

The aim of the working group would be to consider some of the following concerns:

1. The impression of the industry in the public view:

Veterinarians are currently seen to be interventive caregivers. Pets are presented for certain issues and conditions. The veterinarian's input consists of the information that can be imparted during the consultation or interaction but there is a lack of recognition of the veterinarian as a trusted advisor. Currently the veterinarian sells services and product whereas our most valuable resource is our knowledge.

2. The inadequate use of paraprofessionals.

There is opportunity to develop the veterinary nurse into a more capable and effective participant in veterinary practice. In both the UK and the USA, veterinary nurses and technicians are highly skilled paraprofessionals who work alongside the veterinarian, allowing the workload to be shared effectively. Producing these paraprofessionals requires the development of an appropriate education program as well as informing

the veterinary profession on the effective use of these employees. It will also require a review of the laws around the practice of veterinary medicine.

3. The need for support for animals and owners who cannot afford full care.

The practice of veterinary medicine is a business. To be successful, the business must make a profit. The staff must be paid appropriately for their work. There are many people with pets in our community who cannot afford best care, or even basic care. It is not the responsibility of the veterinary business to provide welfare for these animals. In some cases, best practice treatment is out of the reach of clients, resulting in less than optimum care for pets. In other cases, veterinarians will take on pro bono work or offer discounts due to the needs of the pet and the client. This compromise affects the client, the pet, and the veterinarian, and adds to the compassion fatigue felt by many veterinarians. There are several options to consider in this issue:

- Improving the cooperation between all parties involved in the welfare of animals.

Cooperation and collaboration between welfare groups and the veterinary profession is an unrecognized yet potentially valuable connection. Initially the registration of welfare groups should be considered with standardization of the level of care, and a collaborative association could be developed. This is not focused on free or discounted care provided by the veterinarian but rather the development of social support through a combined front, with a variety of different outcomes and possibilities.

- Promoting the uptake of pet insurance, especially in equine services. While the number of insured animals has increased, there is scope for further work in this area. Investigation into methods to encourage more pet owners to purchase health insurance for their pets, and special programs targeted towards horse owners can be considered.
- Investigation into the possibility of a welfare program for disadvantaged pet owners. This would be a social benefit program with the government. There are options for the government to work with different groups, not limited to

veterinarians, welfare groups and insurance companies, to establish such a program. This recognises that the veterinary profession is not the sole agency responsible for the welfare of animals.

4. In all aspects of this working group, the paramount consideration would be communication between all parties. The problems facing the veterinary profession are well known. Open discussion, collaboration and program development should be supported by communication with the profession, the government, and the public. In return, community, and government involvement in implementing change will serve to support the profession.

The working group would not be limited to the above and would consider other aspects of the situation. The aim would be a comprehensive review of the current conditions with the development and initiation of programs and solutions.

We are all invested in ensuring our pets continue to bring joy and companionship to our lives. The human-animal and the human-horse bonds are well recognized as supportive of the mental and physical health of their owners. Pets serve to reduce human loneliness, reduce stress, and lower their owners' blood pressure. Having a pet improves a child's self-esteem, emotional development, learning experiences and has cognitive development benefits. Communities benefit from pets by increased social interactions, improved health outcomes and by the positive effect on the lives of our disadvantaged members.

Our health is linked to our pet's health. This is the value of the veterinary profession.

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