

**Submission  
No 145**

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

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**Date Received:** 20 July 2023

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I have attached three letter

- 1) A letter written in July 2023 in regards to veterinary shortage
- 2) A letter written in Feb 2021 which ended up published in various sites world wide. I receive much feedback from veterinarians worldwide and I have all of these responses filled in a folder from approximately 150 veterinarians). There were very many letters of agreement and support. It was only in the online space that I was trolled for this letter by some within the profession.
- 3) A follow up letter to the original letter written in 2021. This one was published in the Australian Cattle Veterinarian journal.

I would be happy to be contacted if I can be of any further assistance to the inquiry. This topic is very important to me and I have tried to voice my concerns over many years.

## To the Veterinary Workforce Shortage Inquiry

I have been writing letters and advocating for the veterinary shortage to be acknowledged since 2004. There has been a shortage in regional areas for close to 20 years. It is only now that cities are also affected that it is finally being recognised.

We are located in regional NSW, near a larger centre and have a Mixed Animal Practice.

My husband - also a veterinarian committed suicide in 2017.

I continue to run my practice, I am however ready to close my doors due to the inability to find staff. This will likely occur in the next 3 months if I do not find an experienced vet to join my team. (I tried to secure a buyer for the clinic over the past month with no success. It is near impossible to sell regional clinics due to the inability to staff them). More and more clinics are simply shutting their doors. The most recent one in our area is in Cessnock just this week)

It has reached the point where we have pushed on for too long, and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Action now, will take time to flow through to more vets on the ground. I feel that I myself and many others are not able to hold out any longer for this change to occur - thus making the problem bigger when we leave and large areas of Australia will not be able to access veterinary care.

I wrote a letter which travelled online across the world 2 years ago addressing my thoughts on the current shortage. It was not well liked by many of the vets located in cities, however it touched a nerve with the veterinarians in regional and rural areas and I received many letters of support. (which I have filed away in a folder)

The **main issues** I feel need discussion and consideration are:

- 1) **The issues in the city are vastly different to the regional/rural areas and need to be considered independently. The business models including corporatisation and movement to 24 hour emergency clinics to provide after hours emergency care do not work in rural/regional areas and must NOT be considered as a part of the solution in these areas.**
- 2) **People in rural areas often have more animals in their care than their city counterparts (dogs, cats, livestock). They are much less likely to have “fur babies” which they would spend huge amounts of money on. People in cities often only have one pet. Rural animals often help to run the farm.**
- 3) **The cost of living in regional areas is significantly lower than the cost of living in cities – this needs to be considered with pay rates also.**
- 4) **All staff in all fields of work are placing a greater importance on work life balance and are less likely to work long shifts or participate in on call situations. In the past all veterinarians did this work. The solution needs to consider how to fill this gap in the workforce. It is now considered to be unacceptable to be on call at night and work the following day. If this is the case – we again need many more veterinarians to do the job less once did.**
- 5) **The job is demanding, and many people walk away to easier paths much earlier in life than they once did. Young people these days will often have multiple careers in their lifetime. It is not expected that a new veterinarian will still be participating in veterinary work in 30 years from now.**
- 6) **We are no longer able to service the people in this nation with affordable Veterinary care. Many vets consider it to be a privilege to own a pet – I do not like to think this way.**

- 7) **Veterinarians will never earn what human doctors/lawyers do and this is not a possible outcome. We need to accept that it is a lower paying profession.**
- 8) **Many vets are moving into specialist roles- which previously did not exist.**
- 9) **There are now vast areas of Australia which no longer have a veterinarian to service their area.**
- 10) **Suicide is a significant issue in the profession. I feel that the Veterinary Board and its medical specialists are often involved in the lives of veterinarians who take their own lives. I ask that we find statistics on the number of veterinarians who have committed suicide who were involved in dealings with the Veterinary Board in the 18 months prior to their death. I have not been able to access this information however have tried. I have first hand knowledge of failures in this system which lead to the passing of my husband. I would be happy to discuss this further also.**

The lesser points which I think need to be consider are:

- 1) The feminisation of the profession over the past 40 years. I am a woman but feel that we need to realise that most women will not be a FTE (full time equivalent) employee for a large part of their working life and they do largely still perform the role of caring for their children (there are obviously exceptions to this). The veterinary industry is one in which it is difficult to have a set time by which you need to leave on some days and this is tricky for childcare pick up.
- 2) There are many new graduates who only want to work part time at the beginning - sitting work life balance is important. They expect to finish at 5pm. Veterinary work is not a 9-5 job. Caesareans happen, animals are bitten by snakes and animals are hit by cars. These emergencies need to slot into a standard day, making predictable work hours difficult (more so in regional areas where emergency clinics do not exist).
- 3) Employers are much more responsible for the well being of their staff than they once were. I can speak from experience when I say that I will often work much more than is healthy for me in order to protect my staff and make their conditions as wonderful as I can. I do this because I fear for them leaving if I do not provide fantastic conditions. They could have 10 new jobs tomorrow if they left me. This is not sustainable for employers. If I was fully staffed this would not be an issue as I would have time for the role of support person to my staff. When constantly understaffed employers are not able to look after themselves and are generally significantly overworked. Especially post Covid. This is a recipe for things falling apart.
- 4) If people, for whatever reason, want to work less, we need more people to do the job that less once did. - at this stage I feel that we need to graduate twice as many veterinarians for the next 10 years.
- 5) The job has changed over the past 20-30 years and the administration component and legal requirements involved in both patient care and practice management have also significantly increased. One vet can do significantly less in a day than they once did in terms of number of patients seen due to the larger paperwork demands and complexity of treatments/ referral etc now available. The management of staff and consideration for their work life balance and wellbeing has also put a further workload on the senior members of the team.

- 6) Veterinarians are graduating with no interest in after hours work. It was once considered an important part of the job and all veterinarians participated in this role. It was shared and less of a burden. Veterinarians graduated knowing that this was not an opt out area of the job. This is no longer the case.
- 7) There is a large divide between cities and rural/regional areas. The trends towards larger corporate/referral centres in cities and 24 hour emergency centres has made rural work even less appealing. When this model moves into regional areas, the other practices in the area find it even harder to find staff and the corporates often stop participating in afterhours work. The corporates in our area that purchased mixed animal practices quickly stopped providing a large animal service. Taking a large animal clinic and turning it into a small animal clinic soon after purchase. The impact this has on the workload of other veterinarians in the area is significant. It would be ok if they could just simply put on more staff however there are none.
- 8) Once upon a time (2000) there were more veterinarians than there were jobs available.(only slightly) In my opinion we need to head back to this balance so that the correct employee is selected for the position. Currently we are lucky to have 1 applicant every 6-12 months to an add and they dictate their work conditions as they could get 10 job offers in 2 days. Basically the current joke is - if they have a pulse they can have the job, as anyone is better than no one. This is often leading to poor matches of workplace to new veterinarians.
- 9) The increasing cost of running a clinic and very high cost of wages has meant increases in costs to clients above the inflation rate. Veterinary care is becoming unaffordable for many in society. Gold standard of care is generally offered now as the only option in many practices- due to need to generate income to keep the business viable and also due to the fear many veterinarians have of litigation. I feel that we need to go back to offering basic care options (less cost) all the way through to gold standard. I feel that veterinary care should be available to all members of our society. I feel that the current push towards pets being a luxury and not a right - does not sit well with me. I feel that single parent families and pensioners benefit from the companionship of a pet as much as the well to do in our society. "Charity" is in my opinion a joke. It is primarily a business not a charity. If their clients can't afford vet care they are only given the option to surrender their pet. I have had multiple animals referred to me by the RSPCA as we offer payment plans. A charity referring clients in financial hardship to me.
- 10) We may need to look at the models available in other countries to help care for all animals in society. Our RSPCA is not providing the service we require.
- 11) The wage for veterinarians has increased a lot and most veterinarians surveyed are happy with their rate of remuneration. I do not feel that it is possible to increase wages further in the foreseeable future. I also feel that veterinarians should not feel that they should earn what human doctors and lawyers do. They know what the award wage is when they enter the profession. It is not possible to continue to increase the wage exponentially while still offering affordable health care to all areas of society. I do not feel that this will draw more suitable applicants to the profession.

- 12) I fear for the resilience of the younger members of the profession. I am unsure as to why this is changing so rapidly at present. The rates of anxiety, depression and exhaustion seen in younger veterinarians today was not present 20 years ago to the same level. I am finding that with excellent work hours (<38hrs/wk and 1 in 6 weekends on call), and extreme attention paid to well being and self care for all veterinary staff - that they are still not ok. I feel that this is an issue across many professions but possibly due to the caring nature of veterinary staff it is even worse in this profession than some others. I do not know how to address this - however, I feel that even with 4 day weeks and reduced hours and with careful consideration of exhaustion the veterinarians are still not ok. I have seen many students on placement with mental health concerns, prior to commencing their working life. This was definitely not the case 20 years ago. We worked longer hours and had less time off but seemed better able to cope with this. I am not sure why this has changed. Maybe due to the higher demands from clients these days.
- 13) I do feel that the general public are more demanding now than they were in the past and the constant fear of abuse/litigation is not helping. I do however also feel that this is an issue in the veterinary profession, but also for those working in retail, human medical care, and workers who man phones. It does not separate us from other professions. I also feel that we need veterinarians to learn how to manage difficult situations. For example I teach my staff that if anyone is angry to simply say to them - "I can see that you are upset. What is it that I can do to help this situation?" Generally this diffuses most situations well. Simple skills that help in a difficult workplace are not there, and sometimes not encouraged. The current strategy used by many is to "divorce the bad clients". I feel this leads to worse mental health outcomes for all involved. We, just as other workers need to realise that we will encounter a variety of people in every working day and that these people often have their own issues at play.
- 14) Veterinary care has changed over the past 20 years, many more diagnostic options and more extensive work-ups of cases. The move to specialists- dentists, surgical specialists, ophthalmology specialists, dermatology specialists etc has again changed the industry. Veterinarians are routinely performing less complicated tasks in general practice. This again works well in cities but not so well in rural areas where veterinarians are still required to perform the jobs of the specialists as a routine part of their duties. This again makes many people frightened to move regionally as they are concerned to perform more complicated tasks- as they are not specialists and are concerned regarding issues with the Veterinary Board if they perform these necessary tasks. A veterinarian 20 years ago was capable of performing all of the above tasks. In regional areas – we need veterinarians who are able to perform some so called specialist tasks.
- 15) When I graduated, we were responsible to offer care for our patients out of hours. If we were unavailable, we had to list a practice that was willing to take that care on for us while we were closed. We discussed this with the other practice, and they were aware of the arrangement. In regional areas many veterinarians are no longer performing after hours duties and are not organising this ongoing care to be offered by a colleague. This is no longer a requirement of the Veterinary Board in NSW. Many regional clinics are closing at 5pm and the other clinics in the area are generally not happy to take on the extra clients but it is very hard to turn away an owner calling when their dog has been bitten by a snake or their cow is in trouble calving. I feel that

the Veterinary Boards should outline that care needs to be available for all licensed practices after hours. And that this care must be local – not 3-5 hours away. Personally, I have had to turn clients away after hours. Our message on our afterhours phone now advises that we will only see our own clients after hours. The clients of other clinics still frequently call and are quite abusive when I advise that we can not travel 100km away from our clinic into other veterinarians areas. That we have more than we can cope with in our own area. I have recently had to turn away a man with a calving cow- I had to advise him that if he couldn't find anyone to assist he may need to shoot his cow. This is not a nice position to be in.

16) There is a big push for sharing after hours calls, however this is also not an option in regional areas, due to the distances to travel to regional centres - so the rules may need to be that regional clinics must all offer after hours care- meaning that none of the vets can get out of it and all of them do only their fair share.

I would be happy to be contacted to discuss this matter further. My number is .

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I have also attached the 2 letters which I wrote in  
And letters to the Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW in 2017 in regard to their care of veterinarians