

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Chair
Portfolio Committee Number 4 – Regional NSW

Submission

Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in NSW

I write as a companion animal veterinarian of over 20 years, and as a practice owner in a major regional centre, and my views reflect this perspective.

Much will have already been written about the challenges faced by the veterinary industry. This is not unique to Australia - colleagues now residing in the USA speak of similar challenges.

From a problem-solving point of view the current shortage of workers in the veterinary industry can be related to:

1. Not enough recruitment into the sector.
2. Tasks assigned in the sector.
3. High attrition rates.

Briefly, skilled migration pathways, barriers to entry into vet science such as the high cost of learning, and incentives to work in remote locations are considerations with the first aspect.

In relation to the second aspect the shortage of veterinarians and other changes to the sector may lead to consideration of deregulation of certain practices – for example the use of sedatives.

It is worth noting that veterinarians will have undertaken significant training and are accountable to Veterinary Practitioner Board. This is not necessarily reflected in cost-differentiation and/or perception by members of the public.

The third aspect, attrition, is the aspect that I would like to explore further.

Veterinarians exit the industry for a variety of reasons, but burn out, compassion fatigue, and poor work-life balance are significant factors.

In the field of healthcare there is always a lot of grey. As they say, the pet – or the disease - often does not read the textbook. Added to this the fact that the consumer/client has to pay and there is a scrutiny around selection of diagnostics.

There are many judgement calls to be made and vets make these to the best of their ability. But it is a significant pressure. Have I made the right interpretation? Have I sought the right diagnostic test?

This is coupled with the pressure to always get things right. Veterinarians are generally high-achievers – academically. Coupled with a love for animals and concern for welfare they set themselves a high bar. Vets will mentally replay decisions – the what-ifs, should-ofs...

And society has placed a more significant weighting to the pet-owner bond, and with increasing fees, there have been resultant changes in client expectations. Twenty to twenty-five years ago the client's directive was "give it your best shot Doc". Now there is an expectation that the outcome will always be successful.

With medicine this is not always possible. There is nothing more crushing than bending over backwards, dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't' for a case, and for the outcome not to be successful.

In health there is often the ability to work in team environment where decision-making can be shared, team huddles etc. This can be a challenge in small practices – for example, where there are only 1-2 vets in the practice: how can I get support/guidance on decisions/assessments?

In our region practices have increasingly stepped away from the provision of after-hours services; contributing factors are team welfare, the challenge of recruiting veterinarians who have the option of working in major metropolitan centres without the need to do after-hours, and balancing this with client needs and animal welfare.

Solutions?

As an industry we need to continue to grow our best practises for employee support – for example, the provision of employee assistance programs.

Our education providers may consider weighting other attributes apart from academic achievement as part of their selection process. For example, CSU conducts an applicant interview as part of course entry. It may also be worthwhile to undertake collection of attrition data of veterinarians based on where they undertook initial studies. This could indicate elements that are better achieved by some universities in preparing undergraduates for their careers.

Government can play a role in reducing attrition:

- Support Pet Owner Education - Pet ownership is a privilege, not a right.
- Allow veterinarians to have their voice heard on legislation that impacts on them.
- Be aware of the nuance when considering deregulation of industry practises.
- Ensure guidelines for Veterinary Practitioner Board are supportive of veterinarians and practices (NSW does do this well currently).

And our community can assist by having an increased awareness of the challenges of the veterinary industry.

I thank the committee for its work and the Legislative Council for raising this Inquiry.

I would be happy to discuss these matters further.

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