

**Submission  
No 150**

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

**Organisation:** Sophie's Legacy

**Date Received:** 21 July 2023

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# Sophie's Legacy

## Veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

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

Name: Sophie's Legacy submitted by Garry Putland, Founder of Sophie's Legacy  
Received: 21 July, 2023

#### LINKS

<https://sophieslegacy.com/>

Media Release – Sophie's Legacy "We're Only Human" Campaign Launch -  
<https://www.sophieslegacy.com/pages/mediarelease>

Campaign Media Coverage - <https://www.sophieslegacy.com/pages/news>

Media Release – SA Government grant for Sophie's Legacy initiative –  
<https://www.premier.sa.gov.au/media-releases/news-items/media-release94>

Dear Committee,

Thank you for inviting Sophie's Legacy to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in New South Wales.

#### **ABOUT SOPHIE'S LEGACY**

Beloved vet Dr Sophie Putland, 33, tragically took her own life in September 2021, after industry pressures and client abuse became too much.

Sophie's Legacy was established by her family, in her honour, to shine a spotlight on the challenges facing the veterinary profession and the industry's unprecedented suicide rate. The latest data available shows that on average, one vet tragically takes their own life every 12 weeks, while a 2021 Australian Veterinary Association Wellness report found that 67% of vets reported having experienced a mental health condition.

#### **SOPHIE'S LEGACY CAMPAIGN**

To date, the campaign led by the Putland family, and a group of dedicated volunteers, has:

- Established a GoFundMe Page that has raised over \$50,000 to found Sophie's Legacy.
- Through the Sophie's Legacy website, we have undertaken an independent survey seeking to understand the challenges facing the vet sector and received over 600 responses
- From the evidence collected, the Sophie's Legacy team developed and launched a public education campaign on the 28th May 2023 to highlight the level of client abuse and help curb the industry's mental health crisis and suicide rate.



- Designed, printed, and delivered the “We’re Only Human” poster to 4,150 vet clinics across Australia early July 2023 urging people to be kind and respectful to vet staff.
- We currently have 468 additional requests for this poster from all over the world.
- Our website, social media and poster has a QR code asking the general public to “Take the Pledge” to be kind and respectful to their vet staff and this has generated over 4,300 responses since May 28th. [See live count here.](#)
- Promoted the campaign and strongly advocated for vets and staff on national and international media, including The Project, national television, print and social media.
- Met with South Australian politicians from both sides of the political spectrum to alert them to the crisis in the vet industry.
- Received a grant from SA Minister for Primary Industries, Regional Development and Forestry, Clare Scriven MLC to continue Sophie’s Legacy campaigns and advocacy.
- Received overwhelming feedback and appreciation from veterinarians, vet nurses and staff how important and positive the education campaign has been.
- Our reach has been world-wide as this issue is not limited to Australia.
- Continue to work on the next phase of the media/education campaign to be launched in October.

## **SUBMISSION**

Our submission will focus primarily upon the data collected from our independent survey and feedback we have garnered from the lived experience of those within the industry.

The survey attracted responses from over 600 vets and staff within 10 days, many of whom were aged under 35 and 92% were female; this gender imbalance is indicative of this age group in the sector. We are cognisant that the current vet shortage is a national not a state issue & was at critical levels during the COVID-19 pandemic when international students returned home.

The psychological profile of the average veterinarian is high intelligence, introversion, conflict avoidant and perfectionism therefore, an aggressive client interaction is likely to have a more severe impact on a vet than someone from the general population.

Utilising our survey question “As a member of the vet community, what do you think are the key challenges that the vets, vet nurses and support staff face on a day-to-day basis” the following responses were given:

### **Understaffed/Long Hours - 52%**

The shortage of vets has resulted in veterinary staff having to work long hours, and cover shifts which have no vet allocated to them. As a consequence, some vet clinics have closed, and staff pooled to cover other clinics. Some clinics have reduced their trading hours depending upon staff availability. Many vets are placed on call and after a busy night or weekend attending to emergencies, they are still expected to show up for their shift the next day.

An issue raised repeatedly within the survey was the pressure from short, 15-minute appointments which do not allow for assessment of complex issues or difficult clients. As staff are under pressure this contributes to poor morale, lack of trust and respect, and a toxic workplace culture. Small clinics often do not have the leaders who can create a safe and positive work environment and there appears to be no-one policing the minimum safe workplace practices required by law.

## **Client expectations - 51%**

Most pet owners have a huge emotional attachment to their pets and the COVID-19 pandemic saw an unprecedented increase in pet ownership. Owners often become highly emotional when their pet is unwell and can make unrealistic demands and expectations on the veterinarians who are doing their best to diagnose and treat their pets. As pets cannot talk, vets often need to run blood tests, x-rays and ultrasounds to determine the cause of distress, which comes at a significant cost; often exasperating the owner's highly emotional state. Vets repeatedly have been told "if you really loved animals, you would work for free" and this is after six years of study and a HECS debt of circa \$130,000.

Despite this, vets can still often diagnose & recommend treatment to overcome this issue. However, owners are sometimes not willing to incur the cost and instead request that their pet is euthanized. This situation is completely at odds with the oath every vet has taken and their perfectionism takes a hit. We often hear that some vets have personally covered the treatment costs but most clinic owners are against this as it is not a sustainable strategy.

## **Client Abuse - 37%**

Of all the challenges, client abuse is the hardest to bear and we are aware every vet has at some stage been verbally abused and some physically threatened. Given the psychological profile of vets, this type of behaviour significantly impacts them and can very quickly escalate into depression and poor mental health. There are several reasons for this abuse which range from the highly emotional state of the pet owner as mentioned above to the poor mental health of some pet owners. Bill shock and a lack of understanding on how fees are charged or payment terms that can be offered, can often result in panic and abuse to the very person who has tried to help them - their vet.

## **Poor wage compensation - 27%**

We are aware that vet staff are very unhappy with their remuneration and work conditions so retention in the industry is low. As vet staff do not have an active union, most employment contracts are personally negotiated, and their psychological profile means they will accept underpayment to avoid conflict. As an indication, the average vet salary in Australia is \$102,256 per year or \$52.44 per hour. Entry-level positions start at \$80,000 per year with a HECS debt circa \$130,000, while most experienced vets can earn up to \$158,169 per year.

We were also shocked by many reports from vets and staff who worked long hours without being paid for those extra hours. Why is this allowed in the vet industry, when the fast-food and other services industries are under the microscope and punished financially for violations of the law?

## **Unexpected financial costs - 21%**

One of the biggest drivers of client abuse is bill shock. There is no Medicare-like subsidy for the medical treatment of animals and quite often clinics will waive fees to an acceptable level for clients. As stated earlier, we are also aware of newly qualified vets who personally pay for care if it means saving the animal. There is also a big misconception in the wider public that vets are paid huge salaries, whereas the reality is very different.

## **Fatigue - 16%**

Due to staff shortages vets are working longer hours and taking on unscheduled shifts to meet client demand. A term mentioned repeatedly by respondents in our survey is “compassion fatigue” which is a term that describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others — often through experiences of stress or trauma. Our reality is that long term fatigue is not sustainable and as a consequence, vets are having to leave the profession because they are broken. The undeniable fact is they don't return, completing this self-propagating cycle of worker shortages, stress, and fatigue.

## **EASING THE VET INDUSTRY CRISIS**

The veterinarian industry deserves greater recognition for its contribution to the economic, social and emotional welfare of Australians. This occurs in so many ways, ranging from the multi-billion-dollar livestock industry, biosecurity, farming, to treating wildlife and pets owned by more than 69% of Australians.

The vet industry and State and Federal Governments should investigate a Zero Tolerance Policy for client abuse as well as national guidelines for mental health and safe workplaces including the monitoring of workplace health and safety compliance.

We are also calling for industry-wide and government discussion on:

- establishment of a proactive union to care for and protect existing vet staff and to assist them in negotiating fair work contracts with respectful hours and workloads - help vets to help themselves.
- Transparent and consistent fixed pricing and guidelines to alleviate financial shock for pet owners – and curtail overcharging by unscrupulous clinic owners.
- compulsory vet insurance whenever a pet is registered. This would ultimately reduce the cost of insurance and provide pet owners with a form of subsidised care.
- A “Heart-tick” style of approval for vet practices which concertededly look after staff – so staff and graduates can identify and choose workplace-friendly practices.
- Leadership training for vet practice owners and senior staff to develop positive work cultures and safe practices within a sustainable business model.
- Resilience training for vet students as well as training in leadership, conflict resolution and people skills.
- Continuing education for pet owners about being polite and respectful when attending vet clinics for pet care. Sophie's Legacy has demonstrated with minimal investment that you can, on a national level, impact behaviour and hence the wellbeing of vet staff.
- A National Suicide Register to ascertain the true number of vets who take their own life, as data is currently limited and inconclusive.

## **VET SHORTAGES**

Governments need to engage in workforce planning to ensure the long-term needs of the industry are met and the current pressures are simply not spread across the existing exhausted workforce. Possible solutions include increased placements for veterinarians at university, bringing in veterinarians from overseas, and allowing re-entry for veterinarians who have left the industry.

Our survey shows that the workforce shortage is exacerbated in country practices as it is more difficult to attract staff to rural areas. Governments need to look at ways of attracting staff like they do in teaching, medicine, and nursing. We would highly recommend a reduction in HECS fees for staff who are prepared to work in regional areas, and incentives to retain vet staff in rural areas.

## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF INACTION**

The suicide rate for veterinarians in Australia is tragically on the rise with vets shown to be up to four times more likely to die by suicide than the general population.

This equates to a vet taking their own life every 12 weeks – twice the rate for other healthcare professionals such as doctors, pharmacists, dentists and nurses. If we applied this rate of suicide to doctors working in human health, this equates to a doctor would die by suicide almost every 2 weeks. Using the same equation, two nurses would take their own lives every week.

Applying this rate to the construction industry would see one worker die by suicide every day.

The veterinary suicide rate is a damning statistic and transposing it across other professions certainly brings home this tragic loss in the vet industry which has approximately 14,000 vets Australia wide. The statistics focus specifically on vets, however our survey shows this crisis is experienced by veterinary support staff as well.

And yet the mental health crisis and suicide numbers are undoubtedly far worse in the vet industry than indicated by the 15-year-old data on which we rely.

[This data](#) was collated in 2008 and only included Victoria and Western Australia.

The pressures and mental health issues faced by vets and staff every day are significant with 67% of vets reporting having experienced a mental health condition, according to the 2021 Australian Veterinary Association Wellness report.

We strongly encourage you to listen to the Sick As A Dog podcast by our team member and award winning journalist, Caroline Winter, to learn and hear from a vast cross section of people within the industry and their thoughts on remediation.

<https://www.sickasadogpodcast.com.au>

We also thank you for the opportunity to share our learning and hope that together, we can effect change to protect and nurture our hard working and valued veterinary community.