

Submission  
No 151

## INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:** Sentient, The Veterinary Institute of Animal Ethics

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## Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in New South Wales

Submission by Sentient, The Veterinary Institute for Animal Ethics

### Introduction

Sentient is an independent Australian veterinary association dedicated to animal welfare advocacy based on the ethical implications of animal sentience and the findings of animal welfare science. Our members are represented in academia, private practice (companion, equine and large animals), non-government, government and industry settings, with expertise in many fields including animal welfare, animal behaviour, clinical medicine, zoo and wildlife medicine, epidemiology and the use of animals in teaching and research. A number are qualified specialists in particular disciplines or have extensive experience within industries such as live export, horse racing and greyhound racing. Sentient has presented at international and national conferences, published papers, contributed numerous submissions to state and federal government inquiries, and provided evidence at parliamentary public hearings. We also host final year veterinary science students for Public, Industry and Community placements in animal welfare advocacy. Sentient is registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission.

We welcome the opportunity to assist in this inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW. We are not aware of any such inquiry in the other jurisdictions and are grateful to the MPs in NSW who have had the foresight to address this urgent issue. The veterinary workforce shortage is a problem throughout Australia and while it has many causes, the profession itself cannot be held responsible for all the solutions. The veterinary profession is integral to both animal health and welfare and to agricultural industries, food safety and biosecurity. Despite this, it is a profession in crisis and there is a grave risk that without government assistance, access to veterinary services will continue to dwindle, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Although the COVID 19 pandemic had a significant impact, it did not cause the current workforce shortage; many factors have been building up to this point and must all be addressed. Our submission, which is based on reported evidence and the collective experience of our members, will discuss some of the causes of the current shortage, their impact and potential solutions, which must be developed within a One Welfare framework. The work of veterinarians is often glamourised by the television media but in reality, veterinarians do a lot of society's 'dirty work' such as working in abattoirs, euthanasing animals after bushfires and performing autopsies to provide evidence in animal cruelty cases. Improving the working conditions and support for veterinarians and veterinary nurses, their close colleagues, will allow them to give their best to safeguard the welfare of animals, with a flow on effect for human and societal wellbeing.

## (a) the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry and pathology

The veterinary workforce shortage is now widely acknowledged by the public. The National Skills Commission Skills Priority List formally recognised this seven years ago, and in 2022, veterinary nurses were added to this list.<sup>1</sup> There has long been a shortage of livestock veterinarians, pathologists, and government veterinarians, but this has now extended to all sectors of the profession.

In terms of small animal practice, the growth in the veterinary workforce is not keeping up with the growth in dog and cat ownership. In November 2022, Animal Medicines Australia released a national survey of pets and people in Australia<sup>2</sup> and reported that the increase in pet ownership between 2019 and 2022 was not met by a sufficient increase in the total number of veterinarians, leading to a higher strain on veterinary practices. They found that:

- By November 2022, pet ownership had stabilised after the pandemic boom with 48% of all households owning at least one dog (up from 40% in 2019) and 33% of households owning at least one cat (up from 27% in 2019)
- During the 2019 to 2022 period, the annual average increase in the number of veterinarians was 5.0% (5.2% in clinical practice); whilst the growth in the total numbers of veterinarians during this period was high, it was not as high as the growth in ownership of dogs and cats, even when accounting for percentages of owners likely to see the veterinarian each year.
- There was also a substantial growth in the percentage of new pet owners which would have increased demand on veterinarian time
- The number of veterinarians choosing to work part time also exacerbated the increased demand for veterinary services

It is likely that the increase in veterinarians working part-time has had a significant impact on the veterinary workforce shortage, as the traditional private practice model has been based on full time employment. We believe this model of working has not adapted well to societal changes such as the higher value placed on a healthy work-life balance, the need for working hours that allow parents to spend more time caring for children, including being available to collect them after school and daycare, and the shift towards a female majority in veterinary graduates. Research by the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) in 2018<sup>3</sup> found that 27% of respondents were working part-time, which represented an increase by 4% since the AVA's 2016 survey. Furthermore, this trend was almost equal for male and female veterinarians, 25% and 28% of whom were working part time respectively. Presuming this trend continues, we will need even more veterinarians to replace those who retire from full time equivalent positions.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022%20SPL%20Key%20Findings%20Report%20-%206%20October%202022\\_0.pdf](https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022%20SPL%20Key%20Findings%20Report%20-%206%20October%202022_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Veterinary Practitioners Board 2023, BoardTalk June 2023. Available.

<sup>3</sup> AVA 2019, Australian Veterinary Workforce Survey 2018, Australian Veterinary Association. Available

Concerningly, the veterinary workforce shortage is only worsened by the crisis in veterinary teaching hospitals, which are struggling to find staff and facing closures due to lack of financial viability and insufficient government funding.<sup>4</sup> This would never be the case in human medicine, where medicine faculties can rely on public teaching hospitals to provide clinical training to their students.

## **(b) the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates**

We believe the major challenge in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce is, ironically, the huge advances in veterinary medicine that have allowed veterinary staff to provide the best practice care that animal owners expect and that their own profession's regulatory framework requires. This is a dilemma because the profession cannot recoup the costs of delivering veterinary services due to being based on a private practice model, with the costs of buying or leasing premises, insurance, paying staff wages, purchasing and maintaining medical equipment and fully stocking a dispensary. The Medicare system in human health helps to cover the costs for part or all of seeing a general practitioner or specialist, most surgery and other procedures performed by doctors and treatment at public hospital emergency departments. There is no equivalent in veterinary medicine, something that most owners do not appreciate. Veterinarians are routinely accused of being greedy, 'only in it for the money', when in reality, the working conditions and salaries of veterinary personnel are far below that of their counterparts in human medicine. The stress on practice owners and their staff is detrimental to their job satisfaction and mental health, which leads to the difficulties with staff retention and recruitment. The same workforce shortage affects the much smaller public veterinary sector due to limited government funding. Overall, we believe the veterinary profession has been taken for granted and has not received the government recognition and priority it deserves, and the impacts of this are now being felt by those who rely on veterinary expertise in all sectors.

## **(c) the burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession**

Poor working conditions and salaries for veterinarians and veterinary nurses impact on both their mental health and retention in the profession. A recent study by the AVA on veterinary wellness<sup>5</sup> found that 67% of veterinarians surveyed reported experiencing a mental health condition at some point in their professional lives, and cited that, of the work-related factors, the top 10 were:

- Challenging client interactions
- Workplace bullying
- Working long hours
- Managing a high workload
- Dealing with staff shortages

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<sup>4</sup> Sparks fly as Australian school moves to shut veterinary hospital - News - VIN

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/resources/thrive/documents/ava-short-report-research-findings.pdf>

- Poor leadership
- Dealing with COVID-19
- Poor remuneration
- After-hours and on-call work
- Poor workplace culture

The results of this survey capture what too many veterinary staff experience – a high stress environment with long hours, an inability to leave work on time, low pay<sup>6</sup> (\$27 per hour min for level 4 veterinary nurse and \$40.67 for level 4 veterinary), verbal abuse from clients, the ongoing threat of complaints and often poor management or even a toxic work culture that involves bullying. This workplace environment is a recipe for compassion fatigue, burnout and poor mental health and is only worsened by the workforce shortage due to the increasing pressure, fatigue and low morale faced by remaining staff. The alarmingly high suicide rate for veterinarians, which has been cited as being four times the national average<sup>7</sup>, has been public knowledge for some years. All of this points to not just a workforce shortage, but a problem with the wellbeing of veterinary staff that must be addressed.

These findings are consistent with anecdotal reports we have received from our membership body. Entry into veterinary clinical work is notoriously difficult following graduation and it is often said that the first practice can ‘make or break’ clinicians. Unlike other health professions, there has never been a formalised system of mentorship or supervision to support the development of less experienced veterinarians and the ability to receive feedback, and guidance on clinical work is further reduced by the current workforce shortage. Newly graduated or less experienced veterinarians may find themselves working without access to senior clinicians and the same lack of support in professional development is faced by veterinarians who are re-entering the profession. It is quite common for veterinarians to find themselves working as sole charge in small clinics. Another practice management issue is the failure of the profession to adapt to the needs of veterinarians who choose to work part-time for family or other reasons. The shift towards part-time work may be partly responsible for the veterinary shortage, but practice models that incorporate a number of shorter shifts could potentially make up their full-time equivalents in staffing if working conditions were known to be attractive to future recruits. Some veterinarians who wish to work part time leave the profession because of the preference by practice owners for full time staff and a sense of guilt that they are not ‘pulling their weight’.

Even in well managed practices, veterinary staff are subjected to moral distress due to the unique challenges they face. Euthanasia has a huge emotional impact on staff, but there is no opportunity to debrief or take time out. This is hard enough when the procedure is necessary to prevent animal suffering, but veterinarians can also be asked to euthanase animals whose owners cannot manage their care due to financial or other reasons. Many owners are unable to afford life-saving

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<sup>6</sup> [https://library.fairwork.gov.au/award/?krm=MA000118#P289\\_22118](https://library.fairwork.gov.au/award/?krm=MA000118#P289_22118)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-17/veterinary-industry-grapples-with-high-suicide-rate/100142650>

surgery and instead, opt for euthanasia. Others can only pay for the cheapest treatment, which may not be very effective. Veterinarians are excellent at problem solving and finding some way to help the animals in their care, but it is demoralising to be unable to provide significant relief of animal suffering on a regular basis. The gap between what owners expect along the spectrum of care<sup>8</sup> and what they can afford is increasing, and this creates tension between veterinarians and their clients, reduces job satisfaction and increases the risk of complaints. Many clients hold the belief that veterinarians are highly paid because their services are so expensive, and they fail to appreciate that this would be the same for human health care were it not for Medicare. Countless veterinarians have been accused of not caring, hearing words to the effect of: "I thought you were supposed to care about animals, you're just in it for the money". The impact of these accusations and the awareness of not being able to treat an animal using best practice care is a painful dilemma for veterinarians that is one of the unique challenges in this profession.

Some causes of moral distress experienced by veterinary staff are outcomes of inadequacies in animal welfare legislation and regulations around companion animal management. The prevalence of dogs with health problems directly related to their breeding is one of these. The increasing popularity in brachycephalic (flat faced dogs) as pets is a prime example. Many owners cannot afford the surgery required to improve the quality of life of these dogs, and even when they do, the improvement is not always significant. Veterinarians are placed in an ethical dilemma because treating these animals is not enough, but speaking out against their breeding may alienate owners, leaving veterinarians concerned they will not be able to improve the animal's welfare.<sup>9</sup> We need to know the extent to which the increased likelihood of treating animals who were bred to be diseased takes the gloss off veterinary careers that are now mostly in companion animal practice. Another example is dealing with aggressive dogs whose owners have not provided the required training or socialisation. It is often not possible to fully assess or treat these dogs due to the risk to human safety and this can leave veterinarians feeling ethically compromised and at risk of abuse by owners.

#### (d) the role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses

Veterinary nurses are exposed to the same workplace pressures as veterinarians but are on a significantly lower salary. Their very low pay rates are a huge problem, particularly for those who are parents and end up being not much better off financially after paying for childcare. We are aware of veterinary nurses who are single mothers and wish to work more shifts per week but can only do a few due to the potential loss of their single-parent allowances. A broader issue that affects veterinary nurses in Australia is a poor career path and being used inefficiently whereas

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<sup>8</sup> [What is the spectrum of care? \(aaha.org\)](http://aaha.org)

<sup>9</sup> Fawcett A, Barrs V, Awad M, Child G, Brunel L, Mooney E, Martinez-Taboada F, McDonald B, McGreevy P. Consequences and Management of Canine Brachycephaly in Veterinary Practice: Perspectives from Australian Veterinarians and Veterinary Specialists. *Animals*. 2019; 9(1):3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9010003>

they could be further upskilled and take up specific roles, which would increase their job satisfaction and retention in the profession and free up the time of veterinarians. This lack of opportunity for growth is a reason why many nurses are leaving and going into totally unrelated fields that offer better pay, more respect and less stress. Research from the UK<sup>10</sup> has identified that career progression is the most common reason for veterinary nurses quitting their roles, accounting for 36.7% of resignations in 2021. It is concerning that there is no legislated definition of a veterinary nurse in NSW and nor is there a national veterinary nurse registration body, both of which are required to ensure that unqualified staff (such as animal attendants) do not perform duties that should be assigned to veterinary nurses (or veterinary technicians). This protection of title and recognition of their professional status, along with better remuneration, could go a long way towards improving the retention of veterinary nurses, as would further opportunities for career development as we see in the US and the UK. Veterinary nurses are also feeling the impact of the workforce shortage in veterinarians and veterinary nurses. Nurses often work alone to care for patients in busy wards with limited access to veterinarians (who may be doing consults or surgery). Too often there is little support on overnight shifts for surgical ward nurses, who feel expected to fill in the gaps in emergency and critical care despite having up to 17 patients of their own to deal with, mostly without support. This situation is untenable for the welfare of both staff and patients.

## **(f) the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services**

The traditional model of providing after-hour veterinary services has been for staff in veterinary clinics to be on call for 24-hours on a roster basis. This model, which has a detrimental impact on the health and work satisfaction of staff, has mostly been superseded in urban areas by the establishment of emergency centres, where clinicians are rostered for shifts of normal length, which may be day or night shifts. Due to the difficulties of recruiting veterinarians to private clinics, however, more owners have been forced to use emergency centres in normal business hours, which has created pressure on these centres and longer waiting times for treatment. Furthermore, the staff to patient ratios in the night shifts are very low, and the pressure on those veterinarians has increased due to the workforce shortage. In rural and regional areas, after-hour veterinary services are generally provided by the same staff who work during the daytime, sometimes in collaboration with other clinics. Many practices in rural and regional areas have reduced or stopped offering after-hour care, which further reduces access to veterinary services and increases pressure on other clinics.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.veterinarytimes.co.uk/news/more-than-one-third-of-nurses-quitting-over-career-progress-study/>



## **(g) the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians**

The veterinary profession is regulated by both the profession itself and by the government.

The Veterinary Practice Act 2003<sup>11</sup> regulates the provision of veterinary services for the following purposes:

- a) to promote the welfare of animals
- b) to ensure that consumers of veterinary services are well informed as to the competencies required of veterinary practitioners
- c) to ensure that acceptable standards are required to be met by veterinary practitioners so as to meet the public interest and national and international trade requirements
- d) to provide public health protection.

We note that the first mentioned purpose is to promote the welfare of animals, yet the impact of the veterinary workforce shortage can only have negative welfare implications for animals in all sectors of the profession. Veterinarians cannot work in a vacuum – to uphold the welfare of animals in their care, practicing veterinarians require progressive animal welfare legislation (such as a ban on irresponsible breeding practices) and government financial support of their profession.

The Veterinary Practice Act 2003 does not regulate veterinary nurses and other staff in veterinary teams. Addressing this would improve the regulatory framework to safeguard the standard of care offered by veterinary services and potentially increase the veterinary workforce.

One of the most stressful experiences for veterinarians is to be the subject of a complaint. The complaints process is essential to ensure that acceptable standards are met by veterinarians, not only to meet the public interest but to uphold animal welfare. We are aware, however, that the circumstances that generate many complaints have developed in the context of veterinarians being over-burdened, lacking access to consultation with other veterinarians, perhaps working in isolation and subjected to all the other stresses of a profession that is short-staffed and poorly remunerated for the hours worked. Client abuse is a reality for many veterinary personnel. The Veterinary Practitioners Board under the current legislation can only address these complaints through a disciplinary procedure, with a focus on the individual veterinarian rather than the practice processes and culture which, if not addressed, will remain as underlying causes of further complaints.

## **(h) the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales**

The shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote communities is putting animals, particularly horses and livestock, in danger due to lack of access to treatment for serious illness and injury, including obstetric complications. Many practices are shutting down, which increases

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<sup>11</sup> [Veterinary Practice Act 2003 \(nsw.gov.au\)](http://www.nsw.gov.au)



pressure on remaining clinics, who need to cover extensive areas and are unable to attend to calls promptly. This situation is having a severe impact on sheep and cattle farmers and is detrimental to the welfare of all animals in these regions.<sup>12</sup> There is also a risk to the agricultural industry. The Australian Veterinary Association's CEO Dr David Andrews<sup>13</sup> has expressed disappointment that the Australian Government failed to address the regional veterinary shortage in the 2023-24 Federal Budget and said many more agricultural communities were at risk of losing their veterinary services as a result. Another concern is that having fewer veterinarians to respond to animal emergencies and exotic diseases poses a biosecurity risk.

## **(i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations**

Veterinarians in private clinics have always been expected to provide pro bono treatment for injured wildlife brought in by members of the public or by certified wildlife carers. This has never been an ideal model due to lack of experience in addressing the unique needs of these animals and discouragement by some practice owners concerned about wildlife taking up space in the hospital and detracting from the focus on paid clients. Only a minority of injured wildlife is seen in designated wildlife charities that include care by veterinarians with expertise in this highly specialised area. The current veterinary workforce shortage poses an increased risk that injured wildlife will be turned away or will receive inadequate care by staff in clinics swamped by paying clients. We are aware of not only injured wildlife, but also exotic animals and strays being placed in an isolated area of the clinic and not attended to in a timely manner or even being overlooked.

## **(j) the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others**

The impact of the current veterinary shortage can only be detrimental to animal welfare due to delays in or lack of essential treatment, preventative care and assistance with training and socialisation in the case of dogs. We are aware of the following consequences of the veterinary shortage in small animal practice:

- Longer wait times for appointments which can lead to delays in treatment (including essential surgery) and worsening of the animal's condition, including the risk of prolonged suffering or even a painful death. This is particularly dangerous when non-specific symptoms arise from potentially fatal conditions such as foreign body ingestion.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2023-03-03/veterinary-shortage-nsw-pets-livestock-farm-call-outs/102045538>

<sup>11</sup> [Veterinary Peak Body Renews Calls for HECS Debt Relief | Mirage News](#)

- Owners shopping around different clinics to find an appointment reduces the continuity of care and veterinary practices are often too busy to obtain medical records from other clinics.
- Owners treating their own pets by using human medications (such as paracetamol, which can be fatal) or by re-using previously prescribed medications that may pose risks if applied to the new medical issue. An example is applying a topical steroid cream to the eye of a dog or cat with a corneal injury, which can delay healing and cause serious complications.
- No staff to run puppy pre-schools, so many dogs are not receiving the necessary training and socialisation. This can lead to behaviour problems and handling difficulties, which in many cases can make it very difficult for veterinarians to assess and treat these dogs, also posing a potentially serious occupational and safety risk for veterinary staff.

Likewise, the veterinary workforce shortage risks the following detrimental impacts on the welfare of animals in shelters and pounds:

- The volume of animals in shelters exceeds staff capacity to provide adequate care, worsened by the current increase in pet surrenders in the context of high cost of living pressures<sup>14</sup>
- US research has found that delays in access to veterinary care in shelters places animals at risk of longer stays before being rehomed, deterioration in behaviour and mental state, overcrowding, increased spread of infectious diseases, and higher rates of euthanasia<sup>15</sup>
- Pressure to speed through desexing surgeries can lead to more tissue damage
- Dealing with contagious diseases at high volumes may mean individual animals are not made as comfortable as they could because they need to be treated en masse

## **(k) current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations**

Members of the public on lower incomes have always been disadvantaged in accessing veterinary care due to the lack of animal charities providing free or low-cost ongoing veterinary care and the lack of government subsidy of veterinary treatment. For this group of animal owners, pet insurance policies are not an option, and although they may be offered afterpay schemes, they may not qualify for these due to existing debts or inconsistent incomes. The current veterinary shortage is potentially further reducing their access to care for their animals as they are less able to pay for treatment at emergency centres, which are much more expensive, and they may not have private transport to travel further afield to find an appointment for their pets. Many local

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-02/animal-shelters-overflowing-with-record-pet-surrenders/102284546?utm\\_campaign=abc\\_news\\_web&fbclid=IwAR1g9gngkz8E0ke0IWmVMTkz9jIT8G3AMRx84EOrsaRYaK3FVkhVeyRe3pc](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-02/animal-shelters-overflowing-with-record-pet-surrenders/102284546?utm_campaign=abc_news_web&fbclid=IwAR1g9gngkz8E0ke0IWmVMTkz9jIT8G3AMRx84EOrsaRYaK3FVkhVeyRe3pc)

<sup>15</sup> <https://sheltermedicine.veterinarymed.ufl.edu/2023/02/05/california-veterinary-shortage/>

clinics have ceased providing home visits due to the time involved when there are fewer veterinarians to treat the patient list for the day. Increased travel time and expense is also a barrier to those who live in regional, rural and remote locations and may have to travel for hours to access treatment for their sick animals, both large and small.

## (I) strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practising veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

It is crucial that a range of strategies be implemented to both support and increase the number of practising veterinarians, particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales. Unless the reasons for veterinary staff leaving the profession are addressed, we are concerned that this may deter the next generation from considering a veterinary career. Sentient advocates the following strategies to support and enhance the veterinary workforce:

### Government support:

- Financial support for the veterinary industry, such as Veticare<sup>16</sup> being introduced in Victoria, which will be similar to the Medicare scheme in human health by providing free or subsidised veterinary care for eligible animals via a network of public clinics and specialist wildlife centres. We believe this should actually be addressed at a Federal level, which would be warranted due to the number of Australians who are pet owners. According to Pets in Australia, a national survey of pets and people released by Animal Medicines Australia in November 2022<sup>17</sup>, 69% of the estimated 10.1 million households in Australia owned a pet compared to 61% in 2016 and 2019, with 48% owning a dog (with an estimated 6.4 million dogs nationwide) and 33% owning a cat (with an estimated 5.3 million pet cats). Regarding veterinary visits, 84% of dog owners and 69% of cat owners had taken their pet within the last 12 months.
- Fully waiving HECS fees for veterinarians, at least in rural, regional and remote areas as the government has done for doctors, nurses and teachers in remote communities
- Fully subsidising veterinary nurse training via TAFE courses
- More government funding of university veterinary teaching hospitals
- Subsidised veterinary clinics for treating wildlife
- Enhancing the role of district veterinarians and increasing salaries
- Mandatory employment of veterinarians in all animal production industries
- Financial support to the AVA's mental health initiatives for veterinarians

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<sup>16</sup> [VETERINARYICARE \(scenicnews.com.au\)](https://www.scenicnews.com.au/veterinaryicare)

<sup>17</sup> [AMAU008-Pet-Ownership22-Report v1.6 WEB.pdf \(animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au\)](https://www.animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/AMAU008-Pet-Ownership22-Report_v1.6_WEB.pdf)

## Industrial change and practice management:

- Raising the minimum salaries for veterinarians and veterinary nurses
- Better working conditions to retain veterinary staff, such as access to support and supervision, flexible working arrangements and alternatives to being on-call for 24 hours
- Veterinary profession to establish in all practices a mentor/supervision system to support new graduates and veterinarians returning to the profession, such as by shadowing and working with experienced veterinarians with a gradual increase in responsibility that fits the practice needs
- Expanding the role of veterinary nurses by establishing a professional national registration body and a formal accreditation process, developing career pathways that involve areas of specialty (running clinics, performing more veterinary tech work) and establishing nurse practitioner roles
- Practice models that support working parents (such as offering consulting roles during school hours) and that allow veterinarians to work part time and specialise in areas of interest<sup>18</sup>

## Regulatory framework:

The regulatory framework of the profession needs to be adapted to support a team-based approach, enhancing the welfare of both animals and veterinary staff. We advocate the following:

- Update the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 to include the regulation of veterinary nurses and other paraprofessionals, to be registered via the Veterinary Practitioners Board
- Adapt the complaints process under the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 to allow the Veterinary Practitioners Board to address underlying systemic issues in veterinary practices that have led to human error by individual practitioners, with the facility to move beyond disciplinary measures to also offer education and support to veterinary teams to reduce the risk of future adverse outcomes

## Animal welfare legislation:

- Legislation to ban the breeding of dogs (and cats) with morphologies that cause disease and suffering, e.g., brachycephalic breeds
- Legislative ban on puppy (and kitten) farming in NSW and stronger regulation of companion animal breeders

## Veterinary education:

- Veterinary schools to not just teach the 'gold standard' but to introduce the concept and practice of spectrum of care (e.g., running specific blood tests versus an entire panel, not

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<sup>18</sup> VETERINARYERINARY CRISIS - Issuu

referring all heart cases to cardiologists etc.). Veterinary care exists along a continuum and students need better preparation for the realities of clinical practice.

- Improve training of veterinary nurses to take over more tasks from veterinarians and to improve career pathways such as in the UK, where an increasing number of career pathways are available after advanced training, such as in emergency and critical care, anaesthesia and surgical nursing, with plans to introduce veterinary nurse practitioner roles. Furthermore, Certificate IV training is insufficient for ensuring core competencies by day one on the job, so veterinary nurse training could move towards a diploma or degree, as is the case overseas, either via a university course with block release or an apprenticeship model.

## (m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care

Sentient supports strategies to ensure that all animals owned or managed by humans (included those affected by human intervention, such as wildlife) can receive veterinary care as needed. We acknowledge that strategies to improve access to veterinary care will depend on increasing the veterinary workforce, but these strategies themselves are likely to reduce pressure on the existing workforce and attract more veterinarians and veterinary nurses to the sector. We advocate:

- The establishment of Government support for veterinary practices, such as the proposed Veticare scheme in Victoria, via which pet owners pay an annual fee and receive a Veticare card that would pay for the scheduled, but not the gap fee, with concessions for welfare recipients, including pensioners
- Government support for organisations such as charities that provide low-cost or free veterinary care to owners who are under-privileged
- Schemes to support veterinary nurses to become veterinary nurse practitioners

## (n) any other related matter

We wish to highlight throughout this submission that the impact of the veterinary workforce shortage is detrimental to the remaining staff (veterinarians, veterinary nurses, practice owners, animal attendants, practice managers and administrative staff). None of this is conducive to augmenting the veterinary workforce. Some of the negative consequences to their wellbeing include the following, which is why a One Welfare approach to the issue is essential:

- Practice owners unable to take leave due to difficulty finding locums
- Staff working longer shifts, having no lunch breaks and struggling to get leave
- Unreasonable time pressure for veterinary consults
- Lack of veterinary team members to consult with as needed, often only one veterinarian working at a time
- Nurses over stretched, may not be available in timely manner to assist veterinarians and vice versa



The veterinary voice in animal welfare

- Retiring veterinarians having trouble selling their practices, delaying their retirement plans
- Lack of experienced veterinarians in the profession – many practices can only recruit new graduates, so the quality of care and professional growth is compromised
- Concerns about taking sick leave, family leave or bereavement leave as needed
- High rates of job dissatisfaction, compassion fatigue and poor mental health, with an increased suicide risk

21/7/2023

Contact: Dr Rosemary Elliott, President