

Submission
No 154

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

To whom this may concern,

I am a large animal veterinarian that has worked and taught in a University Veterinary Teaching Hospital for the best part of 12 years. I have specialist training in an Equine related discipline but have been teaching practical skills in all large animal species during my time at the University.

The veterinarian shortage is not confined to NSW or Australia but is being felt across the world. This is a multi-faceted issue that has been overlooked for a while but boils down to demographics of the veterinary industry. As the profession has transitioned from a male dominated industry to a female dominated industry, there was always going to be a point in time where there would not be enough veterinarians to provide the same level of services, let alone increased services as rates of pet ownership have increased. This is simply a maths problem. As female vets get to a certain age, a subset will temporarily leave the profession to start families. Society is evolving but the vast majority of childbearing duties falls onto the female partner. The problem arises where a subset of female vets at this stage leaves the profession entirely, or only return part time. This means that there is now a requirement for 2 or more vets to provide the same level of service as previously. This is a normal part of the life cycle and should be encouraged, but it means that a shortage of vets was inevitable unless there was a significant increase in vets being graduated. Whilst there has been an increase in the number of vet schools in Australia and number of graduates per year, there are a substantial subset that move overseas, whether they are domestic students looking for different experiences or foreign students. The domination of industry by female vets is not a problem and actually makes it a wonderful place to work. As opposed to some of the submissions, we cannot just admit more males into the degree. The profession has not appealed to male students for many years because of the high level of effort required and the relatively low pay, it is not because Universities only admit based on high ATAR/test scores.

It was not long ago that the award wage for new graduate veterinarians was just above \$40,000 p.a. for a course that takes 5-6 years to complete and can incur debt level that exceed \$100,000. This is not an attractive proposition to many prospective students but is not enough to deter many female students. However, when decisions are made about which partner will become the primary carer of children, it ultimately falls onto the female vet because of financial and skillset reasons.

The students that now come through and graduate from veterinary courses are of a different generation, with different expectations on life and work. Many do not want to work a full work week and be on call 24/7 for weeks on end. In fact, for many new graduate vets, a full work week is 40 hours over 4 days. This means for a vet clinic that is open 5 days during the week plus weekends, there needs to be additional vets to support the opening hours of the clinic and adds to the pure numbers of vets required in the industry.

Another major reason that there is a worldwide shortage of vets is the large number of recent graduates that leave the profession, mostly due to mental health and burnout issues. There has been a lot of media attention about this problem in recent years and is a difficult issue to fix. As a whole, I believe that Universities have failed students and the general population in this area. It is not necessarily the Vet Faculties and Schools, but policies within universities make it very difficult to fail students that do not have the maturity and skill set to survive and thrive in clinical practice. Anti-discrimination policies mean that within the safe space of university, students are not put under the controllable stressful situations that are required to help them develop the resilience required in clinical practice. Universities should also look at incorporating classes to help students develop the necessary tools and resilience to survive in clinical practice.

Private practice owners and managers also play a significant role in helping retain new graduates within the veterinary industry. When a practice hires a new graduate veterinarian, they should do so with the understanding that their skills and confidence will need to be nurtured within the early stages of their career. Mentorship and empathy within the first few months after graduation can play a significant role in how a graduate perceives the industry and how long they end up staying. Anecdotally there are many situations where new graduates have been thrown into the deep end with no support from older veterinarians and are expected to start making money for the clinic immediately. This puts new graduates under a significant amount of pressure and can mean they burn out and leave the profession faster. This situation is often compounded with new graduates in mixed practice by being placed on call almost immediately because the overworked vets at the clinic need a break. New graduates can sometimes struggle with the transition of taking full responsibility of cases during the day, besides being left alone to handle overnight emergencies as well. There is a specific reason why accounting/economics graduates like working for the Big 4 Accounting Firms (EY, KPMG, PWC and Deloitte). They understand that they will likely be overworked and underpaid but they will receive high quality industry training that can set up their careers. This is a vital component in the veterinary industry that can be erratic and changes from clinic to clinic. The entry of more corporate veterinary businesses into the market may change this situation and offer new graduates more support and training.

One way to alleviate the pressure of vet shortages is to have nationally recognised registration of veterinarians. This has been discussed for over a decade but has never been enacted. The Covid pandemic and climate change (floods, fires) have highlighted the need for mobility within the vet workforce but also sensible management of towns on state borders. National registration would allow for better movement of vet skills across borders without punishing clients and vets with the requirement to pay registration in multiple states.

There should be provision within veterinary legislation for the work, training and skills of veterinary nurses and technicians to be recognised and rewarded. National registration of veterinary nurses and technicians will recognise the invaluable skills and patient care that they provide whilst also ensuring they are appropriately enumerated for their skills. I don't think there should be deregulation of veterinary procedures to allow anyone to be able to perform them. I believe that for the best animal welfare outcomes there is a requirement for registration and further education of anyone providing veterinary services to animals.

Veterinary education is very expensive, for the Universities that run the courses and the students that undertake the courses. Government funding in the right areas could make a dramatic impact on veterinary services in rural areas in the future. The provision of scholarships for rural and remote students to undertake veterinary training with a requirement to return to their rural and remote communities. Attracting First Nations students from rural and remote communities with scholarships should also be targeted, as they are more likely to return to the rural communities of their families. There are very few First Nations vets, especially in the University system, where members of Indigenous Strategy are from overseas. This is an area where improvement can and should be made. The idea of starting the vet school at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga was supposed to help improve the provision of veterinary services in rural and remote areas, however, anecdotally, many of their students are seduced by the allure of higher wages and zero after hours in small animal practice in major cities.

Large animal practice is not as attractive to many students because it can be difficult for the large proportion of female graduates to move to new, rural areas alone without their support networks. Rural mixed practice generally pays less than their companion animal counterparts in the city and comes with a requirement to provide after-hours services. The provision of after-hours services

significantly increases workload and leads to burnout and can be quite daunting when a single female drives into remote and dark areas in the middle of the night. It is also very difficult to attract students towards a rewarding career in large animal practice during university, because large animal departments are generally treated as second rate. The facilities tend towards the older side, i.e., demountable buildings vs purpose built small animal hospitals. This leaves a sub-conscious impression of importance on students, that working with large animals is not glamorous. Government funding could be provided to support the construction of purpose-built world class facilities to change the narrative and help train the next generation of large animal vets. Over the years there has been lots of government and media quotes about Australia being the food bowl for Asia-Pacific and the world. This cannot happen without a strong network of large animal vets in rural and remote areas providing veterinary services, maintaining animal welfare and detecting and protecting against emerging and exotic diseases. Properly trained large animal veterinarians are at the front line of emerging, zoonotic diseases and can hopefully prevent the next global pandemic from occurring, whilst ensuring Australia continues to produce the high-quality agricultural exports that we are renowned for.

The provision of after-hours services in rural and remote communities is going to be a very difficult problem to deal with. Establishing dedicated after-hours veterinary centres may work in major cities and large rural towns, however, it is not possible for vets to drive to remote properties from rural centres within a single night. Dedicated after hours veterinary centres will be part of the solution but will not be able to fix all issues as veterinary emergencies generally occur outside of normal business hours.

As much as Australia hates to admit it, there is a problem with racism in this country. As an Asian vet who works exclusively with large animals, I have consistently encountered casual racism from clients and from the University. This problem impacts the ability to attract graduates towards large animal practice. During my time in university practice, there has been a gradual increase in the proportion of Asian students, to the point that in some years, more than half of the students come from an Asian background. These students are less likely to experience racism in major cities providing companion animal veterinary services, than they would providing large animal services on a remote property.

I found it humorous that there were several submissions criticising the way that students and graduates are trained at university. All Universities have had trouble recruiting vets to help teach and mentor the next generations of vets and those with many decades of experience in rural clinical practice are ideal teaching candidates. However, these vets have not applied for open positions or even enquired about the course before making erroneous assumptions. Instead, many Universities have had to recruit veterinarians from overseas who do not have the knowledge base about the unique challenges of clinical practice in rural and regional Australia.

The problem with the current struggle of veterinary schools in Australia to recruit and retain skilled veterinarians is that they have had to recruit animal scientists to fulfill teaching roles. Many animal scientists do a fantastic job of teaching and contributing to world class research but should be limited to teaching foundational sciences. However, only veterinarians can teach clinical reasoning processes and help integrate the skills and knowledge that students learn into a cohesive package that results in a well-rounded clinical veterinarian.

Thank you for your time.

Kind regards.