

**Submission
No 156**

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

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Date Received: 21 July 2023

Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

Caroline Winter submission: 21st July, 2023

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in New South Wales.

I am a journalist who has spent the past 18 months investigating the crisis in the veterinary industry. As a result, I recently released the podcast series Sick As A Dog: An Industry in Crisis – which considers many of the elements outlined in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

LINKS

Sick As A Dog website <https://www.sickasadogpodcast.com.au/>

Sick As A Dog in the media <https://www.sickasadogpodcast.com.au/news>

AVA support of Sick As A Dog <https://www.ava.com.au/news/sick-as-a-dog-podcast/>

Sophie's Legacy support of Sick As A Dog https://sophieslegacy.com/#sick_as_a_dog_podcast

ABOUT SICK AS A DOG

Sick As A Dog is an 8-part podcast series investigating an industry in crisis – one that is killing the people who care for our animals.

One Australian veterinarian tragically dies by suicide every 12 weeks, according to the most recent data (2008). While the Australian Veterinary Association found that 67 % of vets reported having experienced a mental health condition (2021). Burnout and quitting are common. Staff shortages are severe and abuse from clients is persistent. The hours are long, the pay is below par, but the public good they do in caring for pets, livestock and wildlife is immense.

This topic is more relevant than ever before. Not only is the industry experiencing its greatest shortage of vets in its history, the number of pets in Australian households are at record highs since the COVID-19 pandemic, with 30.4 million pets, and just 15,000 vets to care for them.

The issues plaguing the industry has worsened and if not addressed, the profession will become unviable, threatening vet services across the country, as well as animal welfare and food security.

The series exposes the shortcomings within the industry, highlights stories of heartache and triumph from the city to the bush and explores the financial, political and community pressure that weighs heavily on those that care for our animals. It also uncovers the potential solutions to help address and arrest the crisis.

As a journalist and dog lover, I undertook this complex issue because the situation currently is unacceptable and needs to change, not just for the veterinary profession, but for all Australians.

This series was partly funded by the Meta Australian News Fund 2021-2022 following a rigorous application process.

This was a delicate investigation which took months of building relationships and trust with the people who shared their experiences, often exposing themselves in their most vulnerable moments. I am eternally grateful to the more than 40 people who spoke to me for the podcast, and the dozens who have since contacted me, both vets and non-vets from as far as the US, to express their support for putting this issue on the agenda.

SUBMISSION

This submission will focus on what I uncovered while investigating this issue from many months of researching and interviewing the lived experiences of those within, adjacent to and external to the veterinary industry. I will also expand on the many solutions I learned, on an individual, community, industry, and government level.

During my investigation I travelled across Australia and spent time in capital cities as well as regional/rural areas including NSW, Qld, SA and WA. I spoke to and interviewed more than 40 people including: Family and friends who have lost loved ones to suicide, who were veterinarians; emergency hospital veterinarians, vet nurses and vet staff; vet students at university at varying stages of their degrees; university program Deans; young graduate vets; mid-career vets; vet clinic owners; wildlife specific vets, equine vets, various pet organisations; and regulators.

The series is centred around Adelaide based Garry and Kate Putland, who's daughter Dr Sophie Putland took her own life in September 2021. She was a passionate, talented veterinarian who, as a result of the mental strain, burnout and client abuse, was unable to cope any longer.

Sophie's death highlights the severity of this issue – her loss, is the result of an overworked, overstretched, under resourced, under paid and undervalued profession.

I note, I worked closely with the Australian Veterinary Association while making this podcast. They were extremely helpful and allowed me access to their advocates who are working to solve this problem.

The statistics:

Veterinarians are four times more likely to die by suicide compared to the general population – twice as likely as health care workers (2008, H Jones-Fairnie, P Ferroni, S Silburn, D Lawrence)

There are 15,000 vets in Australia to look after 30.4 million pets, not including horses, wildlife or livestock (2022). That equates to one vet for every 2026 pets.

In 2022/23 there are 27,596 veterinary professionals – 12,500 are vet nurses (IBIS 2023) which is 45% of the veterinary workforce.

Pet ownership in Australia has reached a record 69% which has skyrocketed since the COVID-19 pandemic (Australian Medicines Australia).

The veterinary workforce is currently entering its seventh year of a workforce shortage, which existed prior to the COVID pandemic but was exacerbated by it.

The shortage is severe across the profession, but it's critical in regional and rural areas.

31 per cent of veterinarian vacancies took over 12 months to fill (2021, Australian Veterinary Association's workforce survey).

30 per cent of veterinarian's plan to leave the industry within the next five years, while 10 per cent say they would leave now (2022, Professionals Australia).

It is estimated 5 to 10 wildlife cases are treated for free each week the average vet clinic, more in regional areas (2018, Veterinary treatment of wildlife in Australia).

The concerns and experiences of vets, vet nurses and vet staff:

Unsustainable and unsatisfying working conditions – 24/7 on call, constant after hours work, long days, unachievable consult times (sometimes of around 15 minutes), often missing lunch or breaks, toxic workplace culture, bad management, lack of support by management, low pay not commensurate with skills.

Low rates of pay and high educational debt – new vet graduates on Commonwealth Supported places leave university on average, with a \$70,000 HECS debt (can be up to \$130,000). On average they earn around \$55,000 in their first year of work and are lucky to earn \$100,000 after years of experience. Compare that to a human doctor who graduates with the same HECS debt. The starting salary for them is around \$73,000 annually, \$103,000 after 3 years, with the average GP earning \$150,000 plus after just a few years in the job.

Reduced career opportunities – many get to five years and wonder what's next, there hasn't been a great career progression or recognition, making the industry an unattractive one to remain in long-term.

Client abuse – stories of verbal and sometimes physical abuse common, negative reviews on social media, client constantly questioning their judgement, lack of understanding around the cost of care and billing.

Mental health issues – high rates of burnout, stress, and negative mental health, and the vets I spoke to say there are few they know who are not on some kind of medication for depression or anxiety.

Suicide rate – most vets admit they know at least one person who has, while some I spoke to said they had considered it themselves. This included university vet students.

Solutions solicited during the investigation:

The series looks at the many challenges, but also explore the potential solutions that exist - solutions that you and I are very much a part of.

They are a tangled web of ethics, economics, policy and politics and there's no one fix. I see them playing out on three levels.

Individuals/communities

Cost of care – to understand the cost of care and that good care costs money. There is no Medicare for pets, no subsidy for the government yet the community expects 22nd century care for their pets in particular, but the actual cost is underestimated or not seen. Vets discount vet bills frequently, reducing the income they have to pay bills, staff, upgrade resources. There needs to be a greater understanding of this cost scenario. understanding that care costs money.

Public benefit – the vet profession is a private industry doing a lot of public good, much of the time for free. There needs to be education broadly around this to redress the balance and the understanding of what the industry actually provides.

Great understanding the pressure vets are under – not to abuse vets and vet staff but most importantly to realise the value they have in the world – whether they're a pet, wildlife or livestock – for companionship, in food production, for tourism, and livelihoods.

Pet insurance – Australia had among the lowest take up just a few years ago at 6% - more it was at around 16 per cent – not always going to cure bill shock, but it will give some control back to owners.

Options for payment – some vets offer pet payment plans – this should be investigated by pet owners and offered by vet clinics to assist those struggling to pay.

Industry

Better support from the veterinary profession itself – continual betterment in preventing and intervention when it comes to mental health and suicide strategies, promoting positive mental health behaviour in workplaces, supporting vets with mental ill health.

Making the job of a vet and the place they work better – more support and training, more flexibility in the workplace, career progression and recognition, and continuing to improve workplace culture and safety.

Needs to promote the value of vets – inherently quiet get the job done kind of people – tell governments, tell us the public, why they are needed and matter.

Internships and uni grad support programs – more formalised program that would streamline graduates into regional and rural areas with support and ongoing training.

Government

Government support – there is no government support/subsidies to now and little recognition of the wider role animals play in our lives. There needs to be some kind of support from external sources to reduce the current financial vulnerability of the veterinary workforce when it provides for what society expects and needs, particularly:

- Funding towards the wildlife that vets treat every day or week
- Funding for disease surveillance for private vets, and a greater capacity of resources in government vet services

Policy changes to identify the public good animals have... mental/emotional and physical health of humans, companionship, elderly/lonely/vulnerable.

Recognition to show that the veterinary profession is essential not optional – considering what vets do when it comes to animal population control, biosecurity, the care of crown owned animals, the expectation they'll respond in emergency situations, which often falls to vets to help out for free.

HECS/Debt forgiveness or other incentives – to get vets out to regional and rural areas where the shortage is critical and bring vets into line with graduate doctors providing them with assistance to reduce their HECS debt in exchange for them moving to regional areas to ease the pressure.

The issues in the veterinary industry are complex, layered and many and so too are the solutions to reduce the mental health and suicide risk, and address the crippling shortage across Australia.

Some solutions are simple to put in place, others require the unscrambling of decades of legislation and regulation.

But the bravest will take a shift in attitude from us all, especially policy makers.

The reality is, we rely on animals for comfort, food, export and recreation and 22nd Century care costs money.

Veterinarians are not a luxury, but essential to our survival and we don't have any option but to change how the industry has operated in the past and find a new way forward.

That's incumbent on all of us.

Additionally:

Sick As A Dog has featured in mainstream media and I have spoken widely about the podcast and my investigation. The podcast has been recognised for these awards to date:

Winner: Radio Today Factual Documentary of the Year: INDIE <https://omny.fm/shows/radiotodayau/sick-as-a-dog-documentary-indie>

Finalist: The Mental Health Service Awards Australia and New Zealand 2023 for Media; Sound/Vision (winners announced 16th August 2023)

Finalist: June Andrews Freelance Journalist of the Year, Walkley mid-year awards
<https://www.walkleys.com/2023-mid-year-celebration-of-journalism-finalists/>

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts and findings, I hope together, we can effect change to protect and nurture our incredibly important and currently undervalued veterinary community.