

**Submission  
No 158**

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

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## Veterinary Workplace Shortage in New South Wales Dr Lynn Simpson

To Whom It May Concern:

I would like to say thank you for conducting this investigation and receiving submissions on this crucial topic.

Having graduated over 20 years ago I can firmly say to this day that I love the work but dislike the 'job'.

If we could remove after hours, discussing money, the propensity of problematic/ deliberately bred to be deformed breeds (with their financial and welfare issues) such as Brachycephalics, Miniature horses and Belgium blue cattle life could be less unnecessarily stressful.

And if we could all have mentors/employers in our first jobs who actually helped instead of handing over the practice keys and go for their first jaded holidays in years that would help enormously.

The first year is so important to hone skills and learn the overall trade to a proficient level whilst being paid pittance.

Several points to consider from my experience:

- 1) Burn out in small regional or rural practices
  - Afterhours calls
  - disgruntled owners angry about costs
  - Having little or no backup
  - Often being expected to use your own car and or equipment (x rays, Ultra sound)
  - Disgruntled solo or two vet practice employers who expect a new vet to 'suck it up the way they did' and survive, not thrive, take pride in, and enjoy a profession.
  - Proper 'New Graduate friendly' labelling. I was duped when I graduated and was left with a grumpy overworked pratt who resented giving help to anyone and had a long list of new graduates who no longer practice after having a bad start, yet his practice was labelled as New Graduate Friendly- This needs some kind of monitoring as it wrecked at least 5 very competent vets that I know of in this one practice.

- Poor pay- not commensurate with fatigue, stress and frustration endured.
- However when I worked as a Rural lands vet the situation was different, lots of support even if on the phone, great hours, great money and the farmers were generally really happy to see you and pleasant to be with – they of course were not paying for your services. How do we find middle ground? For every 5 vet practice have the Government provide the equivalent of Rural lands vet wages to be split and have the practice split the Rural Lands type work?
- Expensive and difficult to get to structured CVE events the more rural you are, both time and distance. More online stuff, or notification of when they are on would be great. Maybe told via the Vet Sx Board, many of us cannot justify the cost of AVA membership as much as we would like to be in the loop there.

2) Poor support from colleagues/employers especially in busy small rural practices.

- This issue had many reasons, often there was little overlap of staffing with one or both Vets on the road making it difficult to train up a newer vet or to learn from a more experienced one.
- Time poor staff with stretched resources.
- Opening too long hours to accommodate clients wanting to drop animals off before and after work so our days were often 12 hours long plus afterhours plus weekends. You never hear someone making a mechanic start or leave early to get their cars services, yet vets kowtow to pushy clients who don't respect the efforts we go to whilst mechanics can charge high prices for their work and no one bats an eye or they justify it by the fact they need their car... and realistically do not need their animal- they want them, but the ownership rarely impacts their earnings?
- People bitching about the bills and assuming we are all on huge salaries. The disconnect is exhausting and we shouldn't have to explain that animals are a luxury item in most cases in Australia and that Drs don't charge like us because of medicare and Government support.
- Tax incentivisation education for primary producers through MLA etc to call vets in a timely manner and be reimbursed in a timely manner or at least know they may get more money back?- this would help animals, help vets do their jobs more successfully and reduce tension with farmers
- Fatigued or burnt out employers who had lost interest in the profession or maybe just in teaching new people upskilling, take away the New Grad friendly status.

3) Poorly equipped smaller practices that do not easily allow vets to broaden their skillset and do not meet client expectations

- Lack, or limits of equipment like ultra sounds or portable xray machines. They were usually in the principals car and not readily available to others.
- Poor general equipment access. My first job I had to use my own car for all callouts and afterhours work. My car was full of vet equipment and was soon difficult to use for my own off work purposes- having an allocated work car from the clinic would have been great. I don't believe we were ever properly

compensated for using our own vehicles and this became quite a point of contention. Employer was taking advantage of the keen nature of new graduates.

- 4) The frustration of dealing repeatedly with 'problem' breeds such as brachycephalics or dangerous/ restricted breeds.
- Frustrating dealing with owners of average animal training competencies who through good intentions take on 'rescue' dogs with tenacious and/or difficult behavioural traits and then their frustration having to live with a dog that will never be a relaxing pet- ie people with Staffys / pit bulls who struggle with the idiosyncrasies of real or potential bad/ aggressive behaviour. Maybe these breeds could require by lay training classes and a special licence to own them? May encourage more responsible ownership, limit irresponsible ownership based on them being often given away (usually as the original owner could not afford or understand the sensibility in desexing/ proper containment/ or proper training).
  - I recently tried to find a 'rescue dog' for a friend and nearly everything in the shelters was a cross of these types of dogs. My experience from shelter work is that these animals can displace less problematic breeds and I wonder if it is time to address these breeds more deeply. I understand some can be lovely, however the owners really need to put in more work than most do. I see too many owners at their wits ends with these breeds and then this is transferred to the Vets. Groundhog day frustration. I would opt to cull heavily on attitude or ability to find suitably competent owners for these breeds. It is unfair on the dogs, the naïve owners and then the vets who have to patch-up, kill or manage these frustrating cases.
  - Similar issue with Brachycephalics, lovely but physical problems plague the animals, then the owners then the Vets. Such predictable scenarios. I dread seeing these dogs now even being walked in the street.
- 5) Dangerous dogs: as a shelter vet we often had dangerous dogs brought to us for rehoming, euthanasia or through our public access clinic as private vets refused to see them.
- I have had dogs on a leash in a small consult room where neither of the two owners were prepared to even hold the dog still for an examination as they were scared of it. When I even looked at the thing it lunged at me leaving me no choice but to recommend they leave it for us to euthanise using professional restraint techniques, as this dog needed serious training to potentially make it safe(ish). Dogs like this rarely have a good long term life prognosis. It is unfair on the dogs, owners and vets to have to deal with these risks regularly. We need to reduce the numbers of them in the community. Banning, fines, no judgement surrender amnesty's/policies?, more money from government for rangers/ inspectors to seriously help crack down on the breeds of concern. It is to the point that many people avoid going to dog parks for fear of them. If you needed a licence for the more problematic breeds surely this would encourage

responsible ownership, or help rangers to manage, seize or prosecute issues surrounding these animals.

6) Unrealistic client expectations:

- Clients watching tv shows of very well equipped clinics/ hospitals then attending a smaller/ less equipped place and entering into bullying and harassment as they can't have what they think they want or will not accept the cost of referral to a bigger practice and all the bad feelings that come with not being able to fix whatever problems on the spot.
- Many Vets also need to understand that euthanasia is a treatment option for many animals especially when married with poor finance availability from the owner. Too many vets/ clinics make the situation worse by taking an end stage animal and clients through costly and stressful diagnostics for a case that can never be fixed.
- I have been instructed by a boss to take a 9 year old rottweiler with an aggressive facial bone tumor for an MRI, I refused and said it was negligent, the dog had the MRI and anaesthetic hours after I objected and died within hours, the client was charged and they never had a chance to say goodbye to their pet. This was a very experienced Vet who knew better but seemed intent on giving the maximum service, not the right one. I quit.
- Could these unrepresentative tv shows come with a notification that they are generally from affluent areas/ big hospitals or Uni's so as not to have clients think this level of diagnostics etc are behind every consult door?

7) Rogue vets:

- I have dealt with many Vets who are poor representatives of the industry and simply have not kept up with the general times let alone veterinary practice. Having worked in industrial primary production work broadly I have and continue to be concerned by the level of generally older (close to retirement age or over) who laugh anytime the world welfare is mentioned. They are only in for the money and serve their industrial bosses and pay-packets above the needs and limits of Veterinary science. Vets need a way to report their behaviour preferably anonymously so as to preserve employment options in this small population.
- People often talk about the mental health burden of bullying horrible clients, but if a person is adequately equipped with the realities of life in general they can usually understand where the hostility is coming from and hopefully overcome the situation. This is much harder to do when your own colleague is the one making your life hell and being a cautionary tale of negligence.

8) Public Education Campaigns:

- Recently there have been public education campaigns on not abusing nurses and aged care workers.

Would it be possible to do something, either ads or pamphlets on a day in a vet's life?

Highlighting hours, responsibility, range of priorities (doing a happy puppy consult at 10 am, killing an old person's old dog at 10.15, then walking into a

routine vaccination at 10.30) to show that we may have fluctuations of attitude, energy etc depending on what range of things our day has thrown at us. Maybe even a 24 hour cartoon window including getting woken at 1 am for a HBC or poisoning, then progressing through the day followed by finishing the day to drive to a CVE thing? All whilst in a shitty car wondering how we will pay the bills? And not getting time with our own animals? People are often shocked to hear of our real days and the fact that we don't work like a GP and refer much of our work.

- Encourage pet owners to do basic animal first aid courses? Maybe as part of getting them registered with a council or joining an equine sport group? We don't have to worry about farmers, usually call us way too late and then shoot things as we drive away. It is fatiguing to be called out unnecessarily because the owner does not know how to apply a simple bandage to mop up small bleeds from simple wounds, an animals normal heart rate, or gut sounds (we all know they seem to google everything else not applicable) or know that letting their hobby cow try to deliver a calf for 4 days is not right.

#### 9) Risks Especially in remote Australia:

- Educate farmers not to point guns at us when we try to help them in remote properties often out of phone range.
- Make sure we are safe? And if a colleague does not hear from us there is a way for them to know where we went in case we have had a car or animal accident in the middle of the night. I have a male colleague who lives remotely and will not allow his female staff to go to certain areas as they are dubious at best.
- I suspect many female Vets, regardless of how capable and worldly we are have been sexually threatened on remote call outs and some could be suspected to be fake call outs to get a female into a compromised position of poor safety-
- Insist on satellite phones in more remote areas?
- A buddy system as has now been introduced for remote nurses doing callouts? Always take a nurse with you?
- Teach us our legal rights in so much as what can we say no to and not be violating our code of conduct/ ethical duty? Ie Drunk aggressive caller wanting you to turn up to their remote property to see whatever animal they say is in distress?

#### 10) New Graduates and Vet Students:

- I particularly despise the use of the word resilience. It is like telling a starving person to get used to being hungry.
- Could we start to teach them the actual realities of being a Vet. Ie Things often get tough, lonely stressful, depressing, however with the right team the sense of achievement getting through those cases is really rewarding and builds on our abilities.
- Better interviews to get a vet that is fit for purpose not just the one that turns up (in understand often the employer is just trying to get things going) too often a more sensitive person may be hired for large animal work and to no ones surprise has a miserable time and does not excel, same as an overly bold and rougher type of person may hate smallies after trying it for a while. There needs to be a way of ensuring vets , when available are a good fit that are likely to get a

strong supportive and rewarding start to their careers, and all going well stay in the profession. Money is not the be all if you love what you do and enjoy the team you work with.

- More emphasis on a candidates experience, personality type and projected career path (ie Rural student wanting to stay rural Vs Metropolitan student thinking they might like cows?) when deciding who to allow in to Vet Schools, The Wagga system of interviews especially of rural candidates seems to be quite successful in retaining rural practitioners.
- Teach new vets basic psychology, ie, often if they are being harassed by a client there is a deeper issue going on with the client and they are just taking out on the nearest person or the person who just unintentionally challenged them by asking for a difficult decision or gave a financial quote the person cannot meet.
- Or if they clash with their boss, it is ok to find another and try again, maybe that boss is a jerk and it is not the new grads fault?

Thanks for reading through my rant.

Regards

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