

**Submission
No 159**

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

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The veterinarian shortage is real and is a serious problem.

At my practices - Turramurra Veterinary Hospital (fully ownership) and NEVS - Northside Emergency Vet Service at Terrey Hills (of which I am Director and hold a small minority share) we have experienced recruitment challenges for several years, even though we are in the relatively fortunate position of being in a major capital city, Sydney.

I am far more concerned by the extreme recruitment vet shortages being experienced by my friends and colleagues in rural, regional and remote NSW. (RRR) I know of some practices that were formerly multi-vet but are down to 1 vet - the owner. They have not even received a response to a job ad in years and have given up on employing another vet. Solo vets are forced to be on call after hours by legislation for days, weeks, months, years with no respite.

Each issue in the terms of reference of this enquiry is of importance however I will restrict my comments to areas that I feel might have an impact on vet staffing shortages.

1) AGE OF GRADUATION - OLDER GRADUATES HAVE LESS MOBILITY - LET THEM GRADUATE YOUNGER

The practice of the study of veterinary science being changed to a post graduate degree at many vet schools has increased the age at which graduation occurs. Up until the 1990s, most vets entered vet school at age 16-17-18 (Qld) or 17-18 (NSW) and graduated 5 years later. They entered the workforce at a younger and more mobile life stage. Consequently they moved around a lot more and were prepared to try practice outside the major capital cities. Now as they are often entering vet school after a prior degree they graduate older and sometimes in middle age. No doubt the universities love the extra fees generated as students have to remain at uni longer but it doesn't seem to improve the quality or employability of the vet graduates. At older age many have "partnered up" and because most vet faculties are in the major capital cities (except Charles Sturt at Wagga Wagga and James Cook at Townsville) there is a high chance the partner is already settled and or employed or their trade or profession is city based - the couple thus find it hard to consider a move to RRR NSW. This magnifies the attraction of the major cities and deters employment elsewhere.

Universities should be required to admit more students direct to the vet degree from school/HSC.

2) COSTLY DEGREE - FINANCIAL, FEE AND HECS/HELP RELIEF

Vet is a high cost degree yet has modest remuneration. The final year of the University of Sydney vet degree doesn't involve instruction at uni, just placement for work experience at private vets. There should be no charge for that final year, apart from a minor administrative fee.

HECS/HELP relief should be applied to vets that choose to work in RRR Australia. Yes this is a Federal issue but NSW should lobby the Feds for this. This would encourage young vets to consider employment opportunities outside the major cities more strongly.

The Federal Government should provide subsidised or "bonded" vet degree positions with a requirement to work in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, eg as Quarantine service vets or epidemiologists.

Likewise the NSW should provide subsidised or "bonded" vet degree positions with a requirement to work in the Department of Primary Industry as state vet pathologists, epidemiologists or Rural Lands Protection Board vets.

If the vet decides not to proceed they would be required to pay out their fees to the government.

3) RELAX IMMIGRATION AND WORK RESTRICTIONS

Also a Federal issue but NSW can lobby. Allow more vets in from comparable training standard countries that are mutually recognised by the Australian Veterinary Boards including the UK, South Africa, Ireland, etc.

Relax conditions of working holiday visa. I am no expert on the conditions of working holiday visas in Australia, although I was recently told by a vet working in our profession that they were required to work in rural Australia for some of their working holiday. However if they had already been working as a vet they were required to work in rural Australia in a non vet role, for example

as a fruitpicker or barman/barmaid. If true this seems silly when there is such demand for their skills and should be changed.

Perhaps working holiday visas could be extended and / or a wider age range allowed for in demand professions such as vet.

4) CHILD CARE

Not an expert on childcare provision apart from personal experience using it for our kids, but worth noting that 80-90% of the vet graduates are female. Improved access to childcare may well help young parents return to vet work sooner. Note this is an issue for vets who are parents, both male and female, and childcare is generally harder to access in RRR NSW. Vet employers are generally too small to offer childcare other than on a very limited and ad hoc basis.

5) AIM FOR SEX PARITY AND DIVERSITY WITHIN THE VET DEGREE INTAKE

I am sure sociologists and demographers would have plenty of information as to why it happened, but the vet student intake is now around 90% female. Good on them, they make fantastic vets, however...

The recent Federal Government uni report was released just days ago by Minister Jason Clare. I haven't read the lot - I am only aware of some the key findings from the media - but it identified that students from RRR Australia, indigenous Australians, students who are the first generation of their family to attend uni and those from a diverse background tend to be under-represented at university.

I have read and suspect it is true that for whatever reason many boys do less well academically at school. Many of these boys as well as the groups outlined above would do well at university if they gained entry and would make fine vets. I suspect that many would have a strong aptitude for veterinary practice in RRR Australia.

The veterinary faculties should aim for a 50% male/female intake and provide a pathway for entry for the above groups.

6) GRADUATE MORE VETS OVERALL

Increase the student intake at all the vet schools to cater for future requirements of the profession.

Vets do an important and heroic job protecting animal welfare and our vital primary industries, with little to no support from the Federal or State Government (versus the colossal spend on Medicare). There is no need for unrealistic expectations of mass handouts from already stretched government budgets, but the changes outlined above would go a long way to helping address the vet shortage.