

**Submission  
No 162**

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

**Name:** Dr Zachary Lederhose

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Firstly, I wanted to thank the NSW Parliament and the members of this committee for their work on this inquiry. As a veterinarian working in NSW I am excited for you to have an insight into our world!

The veterinary profession is a wonderful one. Many veterinarians have dreamt of helping animals from their earliest memories – whether it was helping their family pets or nursing an injured animal back to health. My own veterinary epiphany came when I was in high school. I was a budding equestrian, and in a tragic turn of events my horse injured itself while loading onto a float, fracturing several vertebrae in his neck. In the moment, I could do nothing apart from panic, take a deep breath, and pour my mother a stiff drink to calm the nerves (I was too young at the time otherwise I would probably have joined her!). We called the vet, and anxiously waited the 45 minutes it took for him to arrive. After some initial treatment the horse was prescribed pain relief, and I took it on myself to nurse my horse back to health. Unfortunately, in this case there was nothing to be done and the vet returned days later to end my horse's suffering. I appreciated the care displayed so much that I volunteered my time at the equine hospital on my next school break and then fell into love with the profession! That was over 15 years ago.

In the intervening years I went to study veterinary science at CSU Wagga Wagga, worked as a mixed practice vet in the Snowy Mountains, and now I run my own companion animal practice in Goulburn. During my studies I was fortunate to do work in Pakistan, India, and Papua New Guinea – getting exposure to the breadth of animal industries around the world. I, as well as my peers also traipsed across the country gathering the requisite experience in order to complete our veterinary education – in my case that included cattle farms in Gladstone, Queensland and dairy farms in Timboon, Victoria.

People who work in the veterinary industry are a unique breed. For many of us the work is a calling. We also expect a lot of ourselves – constantly pushing the forefronts of medical knowledge in clinical work, public health, and any other aspect of science which involves animals (spoilers, it's a lot!). It's no surprise that veterinary students are among the best and brightest of their peers – often forgoing a life of treating humans, for the chance to treat a wider range of species, or to help those who can't help themselves. We'll often tongue in cheek say that "Real doctors treat more than one species". At university, we are exposed to the breadth of possibilities available to us in medicine, surgery, public health, livestock health, research and much more. After graduation, many of us find ourselves providing veterinary services to the owned animals that are brought into veterinary clinics across the country every day. It is here where the challenges begin.

Our job is littered with moral dilemmas every day, and these are often heightened due to finances. Veterinarians, remember, feel a calling to help animals... however the fact is that animals cannot pay for our services. A simple example is a dog presenting to the vet clinic with a broken leg. Ideally, this animal will get pain relief, radiographs, immobilisation of the limb, and then surgery to fix it. She will then have post-surgical checkups and medication as well as rehabilitation to get the use of the leg back to 100% function. She will also have care and personal attention from her nurses throughout her recovery. This is what we all want for the pets in our care – they are family members after all! But what happens when Rosie (we'll call her Rosie) is owned by a family that cannot pay for this treatment? The vet treating her will give her pain relief, and depending on finances, Rosie might leave the clinic with a cast on (depending on the fracture), with the broken leg amputated (often much cheaper than a repair surgery), or she may never leave the building at all. Imagine for a moment that Rosie is a stray dog who has nobody willing to take on her care.

As a practice owner I am partially responsible for setting the prices that dictate the outcome of Rosie's mishap. It is a source of great moral distress; I could pay for Rosie's care out of my own

pocket, but what happens to the next Rosie? And the one after that? What happens when I can no longer employ the nurses to give Rosie the care she needs, when I can't pay for the new imaging equipment to diagnose the break, and what happens when I can't employ the vet to see her in the first place. In this example we see the issue inherent with the veterinary profession. We are a private profession that provides a public good, often at great cost to the people who provide it. Increasingly, we see private investment in the veterinary profession concentrated on the areas of greatest return, rather than the greatest benefit – this weakens the fabric of our society.

For however they are treated in legislation (as chattel mostly) animals hold a very different position in our modern society. The public rightly expects and believes that animals will be looked after, and that veterinarians are the ones who are best placed to provide this. This should not change – our depth and breadth of training makes veterinarians best suited to look after the health and welfare of animals. What we need to do is support this provision.

For my sins, I have been involved in organising veterinarians for years, whether this is through student groups or most recently as president of the NSW division of the AVA. In these roles I have had the privilege and pleasure of meeting veterinarians from all walks of life. I have heard their complaints and their challenges. I have heard about the crisis that exists in our profession, where veterinarians find the job so challenging or intense that they leave the work or take their life. These challenges do not just affect vets in NSW – they are nation-wide and world-wide. What this inquiry gives us is the opportunity to:

- Improve the conditions for NSW vets and keep more of them in their jobs.
- Trial and implement strategies that can help vets in all jurisdictions.

I would advise the committee to be mindful of this – the veterinary shortage is a complex issue, and it lacks simple solutions. Some of the solutions such as those proposed by the VSANZ review may take a decade or more to manifest, whereas others such as assisting the care of stray and homeless animals will have immediate effect. I am often reminded that complex problems often lack simple solutions. As Steve Jobs is quoted as saying:

“When you start looking at a problem and it seems really simple with all these simple solutions, you don't really understand the complexity of the problem. And your solutions are way too oversimplified, and they don't work.”

Steve goes on to state that once you really understand the problem, the elegant solutions can often reveal themselves. I hope that the committee can delve enough into the issues to find the elegant solutions. A fantastic guide will be the submission provided by the Australian Veterinary Association – the AVA has canvassed the vets of NSW, and relevant experts across the profession. These are people who have lived with these challenges their entire working life, and yet have put together a measured and rational approach that is evidence based. After all, the qualification we all share is one of veterinary *science*. Having played a small role in its creation, I can speak to the consultation, review and research that went into the submission and I hope that it is helpful to the committee.

My experience is just one of 4000 across the state, but I hope that it has been helpful. And if the committee's work is successful, I hope it is one of many more in the future as our profession grows in NSW.

Yours,  
Dr Zachary Lederhose  
BVSc (hons) BVBiol