

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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The shortage of veterinarians in NSW, and indeed throughout Australia, can be largely attributed to a single reason: the high attrition rate in the industry. The causes of this are multifactorial but common themes emerge as systemic problems deeply ingrained within the industry, of which I will detail further and propose strategies to combat these problems.

Multiple surveys have documented the dissatisfaction of veterinarians in the industry. The Veterinarian Employment Survey performed in 2022 revealed staggering proportions of dissatisfaction as a result of increased work demands, long working hours, inadequate remuneration and poor working conditions. Consequently, 77% of vets are dissatisfied with the industry, 70% would advise against embarking on a career as a vet and 30% are planning to leave the industry within the next five years.

Huge and fruitless investments would be required to correct the veterinarian shortage if measures are not taken to correct the systemic failures running rife within the industry which are resulting in the immense dissatisfaction and resultant significant number of professionals leaving the industry. The number of veterinary graduates around the country is increasing, but due to the high rate of professionals leaving this industry, this cannot satiate demand.

Remuneration - 84% of vets believed they were poorly paid compared with other professionals and that their salary does not reflect the value of their expertise (Veterinary employment survey, 2022). Veterinarians earn on average \$72940 per year. Compared with other professionals of equivalent expertise, human anaesthetists earn \$179894 and surgeons earn \$274820. Furthermore, veterinarians' wages as a share of veterinary industry revenue has been rapidly decreasing over the last decade, meaning the increasing wealth of the veterinary industry is not translating to increased salaries for veterinarians (testing times to be a veterinarian, 2017). Veterinarians have immense expertise, being GP consulting professionals, anaesthetists, soft tissue and orthopaedic surgeons, radiologists, pathologists, ultrasonographers and many more skills and yet these skills are very poorly remunerated. Furthermore, 36% of veterinarians received no form of compensation for overtime. I can personally attest to the reality of this both for myself, and my partner who is also a veterinarian. It is commonplace in the industry that if a patient is presented to the clinic before close of business, even if this is a few minutes prior, irrespective of the severity of the condition and the amount of time required to treat the animal, it is expected that not only will you remain at work to treat this animal, but also receive no remuneration to perform this work. This can sometimes mean hours of work, all provided without compensation. This is made possible by placing the clause "your base salary is above award and includes reasonable overtime as expected by a veterinarian", or similar, in veterinary contracts. These clauses are routinely included in contracts and is a free pass for employers to exploit their employees for endless overtime to whatever they consider to be reasonable. This is enabled by the grossly inadequate veterinary award meaning if employers pay higher than the award, they can effectively make you perform any amount of work they like without any repercussions or need for additional compensation. These problems can be addressed by increasing the veterinary award to a level which properly reflects the skillset and knowledge of veterinarians (at least 50% increase on current award). Given that veterinarians wages as a share of veterinary industry revenue has been rapidly decreasing over the last decade, this would create a reset to ensure the increasing wealth of the industry is shared by employers by wage-earning employees. Furthermore, any phrases or wording implying that overtime is expected and already remunerated should be banned and mandating pro-rata overtime compensation should be enforced, with heavy penalties for businesses which do not comply.

Working hours – as discussed in the previous paragraph, working hours are often unreasonable and unpaid. Many clinics will book the daily schedule back-to-back the entire day, leaving no time to

complete clinical records or attend to hospital patients. This routinely results in veterinarians remaining at work for hours after the end of their shift in order to perform these duties. Maintaining thorough clinical records are an important and legally mandatory task for a veterinarian to perform, and failure to do so may result in litigation and penalties from the veterinary board. However, many businesses do not schedule time during the day for veterinarians to complete this work. Both myself and my partner have been exposed to this at different clinics. This could be corrected by providing regulation, either through contracts or other means, to enforce a minimum reserved time throughout each shift to maintain clinical records (e.g. 30 minutes per 4hrs worked). Additionally, as stated previously, mandating pro-rata overtime compensation would encourage employers to provide adequate time to complete daily duties or risk paying overtime if the veterinarian is required to remain at work to complete their daily duties.

HECS debt – veterinary science requires at least 5 years of study to complete, racking up a HECS debt of at least \$60000-\$70000, if not more, in the process. The ratio of HECS debt to average salary in the industry is amongst the highest of all professions, and oftentimes this debt can never be repaid and forever is a tax burden which impacts on veterinarians' cost of living. For example, this EOFY, indexation meant that my partner's HECS debt increased by \$5000, and only around \$2000 was paid off. After a long year of tireless work, this can sometimes be the final straw for some veterinarians. This problem would be combatted by increasing the veterinary award to a reasonable level, as previously discussed. It could also be combatted by implementing a similar program to that offered to human doctors, where HECS debts are cleared or even partially paid off if a veterinarian works in a rural location for more than two years. This would also help address the chronic vet shortage in rural NSW.

Unrealistic expectations of pet owners – this is one of the greatest issues that veterinarians face every day. Pet owners present their sick animal to the clinic, but are not willing to pay for treatments or complain about the cost and often place enormous guilt on vets by claiming that if their pet isn't treated at a discount or for free then the vet must not care about animals. This is heartbreaking for vets, as for most vets they work in the industry for the love of helping animals. This can lead to suicidal thoughts and emotional burnout, contributing to the high suicide rate and vets leaving the industry. Pet owners often believe that medical treatments are cheap due to human medicine being heavily subsidized by medicare and the PBS and thus draw the conclusion that vets are ripping them off. Introducing and mandating a pet safety net would be an enormous step toward correcting this problem. Government could collaborate with pet insurers to create low cost (potentially subsidized) insurance safety nets which cover large expenses for pets (for example, if the expense is >\$1000 and up to annual sublimits, then a 80-90% rebate would apply on the full amount but if <\$1000, no benefit would be paid). This safety net could be mandated by being a requirement at the time of registration with the local government and paid as part of an annual registration fee. The only way a pet owner could opt out of this safety net would be by taking out a private pet insurance policy. This would mean most people could generally afford smaller vet bills, while for larger bills they are covered by the safety net, minimizing accusations of price gouging, being rip offs or claiming that vets don't care about pets and are only in it for the money. It would also allow vets to provide the necessary treatments for animals, rather than constantly making life and death decisions about what necessary diagnostics and treatments they "can get away with not doing to save the complaining client money". It would also reduce the need for veterinarians to euthanase animals with treatable conditions due to the pet owner not being able to afford the required treatments. These factors have a huge impact on the satisfaction of veterinarians and if these were reduced, would dramatically reduce emotional burnout. Additionally, it would increase profitability of veterinary business, facilitating sustainable to improved remuneration of veterinarians.

In summary, I believe the only way to resolve the chronic veterinarian shortage is by addressing the significant systemic failures which are common throughout the industry. This would require sweeping changes in government policy and regulation of the veterinary industry. The changes highlighted would make significant inroads into tackling the immense task at hand. I appreciate the time and consideration for my thoughts and proposals and look forward to being part of meaningful change to the industry in years to come.

Kind regards,

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