

Submission
No 168

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I am a veterinarian that has been practicing in regional NSW since my graduation in 2015 both in mixed practice and currently in companion animal practice in a regional centre. Since graduation, I have seen the landscape of the profession change from one where graduates needed to search for jobs, to one where practices are constantly advertising for veterinarians. As of my writing this submission, there are currently 177 practices in NSW alone advertising for a veterinarian, many of whom have been advertising for more than three months. Whilst the veterinary shortage is a state wide issue, there is no doubt that regional and rural areas are far more heavily impacted, with the closure of multiple practices in my region in the last 2 years due to inability to adequately staff these practices. On average, I would estimate that I see at least five clients a week that have travelled more than an hour to my facility for veterinary care, as we are their closest practice. This regularly happens late at night due stretched after hours resources across the region. In one particularly memorable instance, I had a client meet me at 6 am to tend to their whelping dog. They had driven four hours to see me. I have also recently had a client travel three hours to seek treatment for a dog with a twisted stomach – a fatal condition if not treated with prompt surgery. Unfortunately the patient arrested in surgery five times and was unable to be revived. If the pet had been seen even two hours sooner, the odds of survival would have been significantly increased. This surgery was performed at 4 am and as on call vet, I was required to perform this surgery, then work a full day of consultations, and follow up with on call the following night, where a cat required urgent chest drainage to survive the Evening. I believe I worked 19 hours that day.

This paints a brief, anecdotal picture behind the reasons for the veterinary shortage in regional areas, which is backed up in statistics provided by the literature. In NSW, each veterinary practitioner is required – by law – to ensure that all of their existing patients have access to 24/7 care. In large cities such as Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong, the solution to this is simple – direct clients to an emergency hospital outside of standard business hours. However, in regional areas, these hospitals are often several hours away – in my instance we would be asking clients to drive for five hours to the nearest suitable facility. Therefore, almost all regional and rural practices must perform their own on call duties in addition to working full time during business hours, with many veterinarians working 50 hours or more per week to fulfil their duties. Veterinarians that regularly perform on call are 10 times more likely to leave the profession than those that do not. In addition to this, regional and rural salaries are often far lower than those in the city, as socioeconomic factors mean that business owners must set prices accordingly to ensure that animals receive adequate care. With the high overheads of running a practice, this places a significant amount of pressure on staff wages. It certainly takes a special breed of person to be a mixed practice veterinarian, and with a significant number of veterinarians leaving the industry shortly after graduation, it would seem that these people are becoming harder to find.

Unfortunately, a simple solution such as changing the award to improve working conditions and salaries for veterinarians is unlikely to have real benefit, as this will place an impossible burden on business owners that are often already running on an extremely low profit margin to ensure that pets may receive adequate care. This may have the opposite of the intended effect and cause more practices to close due to business unviability, further compounding the problem. Additionally, simply creating more places for veterinary students at universities is unlikely to solve the issue, as the root cause of the problem is the shockingly high attrition rate post-graduation. However, there are some ideas worth considering that may be of benefit, such as:

- HECS/HELP loan forgiveness to practitioners that work in a regional area for a designated time frame. Particularly with indexation this year, my HECS loan is higher than what it was when I graduated in 2015 and an incentive to alleviate this pressure may be looked upon favourably.
- A plan to develop dedicated emergency centres in regional areas such as Dubbo, Tamworth and Wagga to alleviate the burden of on call duties and incentivise working in regional areas.
- Formal recognition of the Charles Sturt University / University of Queensland Veterinary Technician degrees through legislation, allowing a broader scope of practice for these graduates. This would then mean that veterinarians may be more effective in their day to day practice as they utilise this skill set. At this point in time, these degrees are not formally recognised in the NSW legislation and graduates of these degrees legally only have the skills of a veterinary nurse, despite an additional 2-3 years of training.
- The current pathway for international veterinarians to become registered in Australia is complex, but fair considering the difficulty of the degree in Australia. However, candidates have only one opportunity to sit the initial exam annually, meaning that most candidates may take 2-3 years to become eligible to practice in Australia. Providing the governing body with resources to run these exams more frequently may assist candidates in completing these exams.

- A review of the current requirements for veterinary practice in NSW, perhaps with special allowance to be made for regional and remote practitioners (ie, access to telemedicine in suitable situations)

These are solutions best suited to companion practice, as I have been out of mixed practice for two years now. However, I think it would be remiss not to take the opportunity to express my grave concerns regarding the current state of population medicine, especially as it pertains to livestock medicine, in Australia as a whole. In the last couple of years, we have seen Canine Ehrlichiosis, Varroa Mite and Japanese Encephalitis Virus, previously exotic diseases, enter Australia. In addition, Foot and Mouth Disease, Lumpy Skin Disease and African Swine Fever have all come dangerously close to entering the country. The Animal Health Australia website provides in detail how catastrophic both socially and economically these diseases would be to regional Australia, therefore I will not repeat their information here. With the veterinary shortage most significantly felt in the rural sector, policy makers should be alarmed about our current capacity to eradicate another incursion – let alone our ability to effectively monitor and prevent the entry of these diseases. This enquiry must consider biosecurity as a cornerstone of their investigation as this is the major impact that veterinarians have on the economy as a whole. It would be considered wise to investigate the current role of veterinarians in government and look to allocate further funding to this area for better disease preparedness.