

**Submission
No 184**

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

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My partner Dr Andrew Robertson and I purchased a rural mixed practice in Warren and Nyngan in 2020. We are in our early 30s and service a large part of western NSW. We are both JCU (Townsville) graduates (2013 and 2014), he is from country QLD and I am originally from Geelong - so a city girl that has found home in the country!

In my view, there are a few components to the vet shortage; poor decision making of which applicants to award university places to, historically poor treatment of associate veterinarians, and a lack of incentive to move and stay rurally.

In some universities close to half of the places are awarded to international students that have no intention of ever working in Australia. This has increased dramatically over the last 10 years and needs to be managed. It's difficult I know and probably a federal issue, international students of course pay much higher fees but these places could be filled by local students who are keen to stay in Australia, even better, maybe head to the country!

Universities should interview (not just rely solely on ATAR or ATAR+application) prospective veterinary students, there should be at least one reputable rural/regional veterinarian on the panel. This would help to improve the selection of candidates who will be able to handle the unavoidable challenges of veterinary practice. Too many recent graduate veterinarians realise after a year or two that their personal attributes are not suited to the profession and leave. This could be somewhat mitigated by more thorough vetting of candidates prior to university admission. Weight should be given to applicants with veterinary references too (ie, the school holiday casual employee that would make a fantastic veterinarian).

Funding should be increased to universities that have a larger livestock focus such as James Cook University and Charles Sturt University. They have a proven track record for producing graduates who 'go rural and stay rural'. I'm a city girl who went to one of these universities and has only ever practiced in rural QLD and NSW.

Thankfully this exodus out of the profession by predominantly recent graduates has forced the hand of business owners who historically have expected a huge work load for little financial incentive. Improving work life balance and remuneration was badly needed (10 years ago I started on \$43,000pa). However we have to be careful of going too far the other way where most veterinarians want to do half the work for triple the pay. This will cause a collapse of the industry. Definitely increasing remuneration is needed but productivity still has to be there.

I strongly believe that an incentive programme for HECS debt reduction would help ensure we have veterinarians in rural Australia if and when the time comes that we have an emergency animal disease event like foot and mouth. It is also vital for maintaining international trade markets for Australian agriculture products.

I think the programme would best work if it was something like a 20% reduction per year of working rural, so that after 5 years rural the HECS debt would be gone. Regional centres could have a 10% per year reduction rate perhaps? There are currently no government veterinarians in the western division and 5 private vets who will try and help out where needed, but in 10 years there may not be anyone if we keep going at this rate!

Absolutely happy to have a chat with any of you should you like to run anything past us for our opinion. We're in a unique position being young business owners in rural western NSW who have recently been associate veterinarians - so we have recent experience in both sides of the industry. I also have experience in government veterinary industry as a District Veterinarian with LLS between 2016-2020.