

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

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

## **INQUIRY INTO THE VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NSW**

### **(a) The shortage of veterinarians across the profession**

In rural areas especially, it is well known that there is an extreme shortage of veterinarians. Many Clinics are experiencing difficulties in attracting veterinarians to the regional areas, despite strenuous advertising of vacant positions. One of the clinics in my town used to have five vets on staff but is now trying to manage with just the owner and 2 part-time veterinarians who are job sharing after maternity leave. It now appears to be difficult to attract veterinarians to relocate unless the clinic owner can afford to offer wages equal or superior to city-based clinics. Clinics also need to offer a workplace with a reasonable work load, which is often not the case as they are short staffed, and an after hours roster that allows a reasonable on call schedule.

### **(b) The challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates**

Regional areas do not have access to dedicated after-hours veterinary clinics which are readily available in the major cities. Individual clinics need to provide their own emergency after hours service for their clients. This can necessitate their staff working hectic 12 hour day shifts and then also being on-call after hours. This is not sustainable when the clinic already has insufficient staff to service their day appointments and fit in emergencies as they arise. Without the provision of these emergency after hours services, it can result in animal welfare issues. In my town, some clinics here and in the surrounding area stopped providing after hours care and only one clinic ended up providing this service. This meant that when this particular clinic was at capacity there was nowhere else to send the client. This was very stressful for the single veterinarian who was trying to handle all the after hours calls, plus multiple cases all at the same time, with no support staff (ie: no nurses, no receptionist, just the vet).

There are often difficulties in finding rental properties, which exacerbates the problem when clinics are trying to encourage veterinarians to relocate.

### **(c) The burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession**

When vets are working long day shifts and are also required to work after hours, their work/life balance is non-existent. They are tired, burnt out, their whole life becomes work and they no longer enjoy their profession.

Many clinics work on 15-minute consultations, which do not give the veterinarian sufficient time to listen to the pet owner explain the problem with their pet, to examine the pet and make a prognosis, decide a course of action and write up a report. This often requires the reports for the day to be written up at the end of the day in the veterinarian's own time or else they just do a very quick, undetailed report at the end of the consult after the pet and owner have been pushed out the door. The reason notes need to be accurate and detailed is because they are a legal document which can protect the veterinarian's registration. It is also important for communication between vets for subsequent consults and continuity of care. When a bad prognosis has to be given to a pet owner or euthanasia is the recommended action, the owner will obviously be distressed and the veterinarian often has no time to offer comfort to the owner which can affect their own mental health.

Some pet owners can become abusive when confronted with the bill. This also affects the health of veterinarians, vet nurses and reception staff.

**(d) The role of and challenges affecting veterinary nurses**

Veterinary nurses are often under-used in clinics. There are many services they could provide to take the pressure off the veterinarians, which may also assist in their own job enjoyment. They are usually frontline in the clinic and often must deal with distressed or abusive clients. Veterinary nurses are often not treated well within the practice and by clients. They have little chance of progression in their career and many are experiencing a similar amount of burn out as veterinarians.

(e)

**(f) The arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary service**

This has also been covered in (b) above. After-hours service is particularly impacting for staff who have just worked a day shift and are also required to be on-call for the night shift.

There are also instances where staff are not being remunerated properly for doing after hours work. This is something that needs to be clearly defined in the Veterinary Services Award. There needs to be a suitable payment made for being on-call and there also needs to be a specified payment for when the veterinarian is required to give an after hours phone consultation. There should be a set hourly payment made for travelling into the clinic after-hours and for emergency consultations and surgeries.

There are security concerns, particularly for female veterinarians, when a veterinarian is required to travel alone into the clinic at night and give clinic access to a pet owner who may be unknown to them.

Where there are several clinics in a town, it could be helpful for them to work together to provide rotating after-hours services.

(g)

**(h) The particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote NSW**

Please refer to (a), (b) and (c) above.

Pet owners in regional, rural and remote areas are often reluctant or unable to pay for the veterinary care their pets require. They can put emotional pressure on the clinic staff to provide free treatment for their animals. To remain viable, clinics need to charge a fair fee for services they provide.

**(i) The role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations**

During the COVID19 epidemic many people became new pet owners, but now many of these pets are no longer wanted and are being discarded. This has resulted in immense pressure on Pounds, Shelters and Rescue Groups, many of which are at capacity.

Members of the public regularly drop off stray animals they have found to their local veterinary clinic. Veterinarians are duty bound to provide free emergency care and they must care for them until Council's impounding staff are able to collect them. Some Councils may refuse to take the animals if their facilities are full.

**(j) The impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare**

When veterinary clinics are understaffed and consultation times are short, it can be difficult to spend the time needed on an animal when clients are backing up in the waiting room. Due to staff shortages, new graduates are sometimes not receiving the assistance they may need from the more experienced veterinarians on staff. They can be left unsupervised with no-one to refer to and this can result in animal welfare issues and undue stress on the new graduate.

**(k) Current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public**

Due to a shortage of veterinary staff, many clinics are only able to offer a limited number of consultations per day plus surgeries and emergencies. This often means long wait times for clients for routine appointments.

Many clients in lower socio-economic areas do not have the financial resources to access veterinary care for their pets. If a pet owner cannot obtain approval to use Vet Pay and has no money to pay the bill, then they cannot obtain veterinary care for their pet. I am aware of a recent case where a pet owner rang two different clinics to try to get help for her injured dog. She asked if she could please pay off the bill as she had no money but was told she would have to pay on the day. Her dog died.

**(l) Strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practising veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote locations**

Veterinarians spend many years at university to become qualified and they end up with a huge HECS debt, which is rapidly rising at a high rate of indexation. This adds to the stress which veterinarians are already suffering in their profession. Governments could perhaps look at reducing the HECS debt for veterinarians who agree to work for a set period of time in regional, rural and remote locations.

More Commonwealth supported places could be provided at universities.

Overseas students could be required to work in Australia for a compulsory period of time post graduation.

Universities could consider not putting as much emphasis on ATAR scores when offering places. This may encourage students with more practical rather than academic skills to become veterinarians.

Pet owners need to realise the cost of medical services because Medicare does not exist for pets. Education is needed on this issue.

If owners are prepared to pay for diagnostic services, this will improve standard of care for the patient as well as improved work satisfaction for the veterinarian, hence increasing retainment of staff.

**(m) Strategies to improve access to veterinary care**

Encouraging more pet owners to take out pet insurance could help to improve access for veterinary care, however insurance policies which require the pet owner to pay the bill up front and then submit their claim for reimbursement are not always helpful, as not all pet owners are in a position to be able to do this. It is preferable for the insurance company to pay the veterinary clinic directly.

Pet ownership is associated with significant health benefits, and therefore economic benefits for government, so it may be possible for financial assistance to be offered to pet owners needing help.

Standard 30 minute consultations would allow veterinarians sufficient time to assess the animal adequately and write up reasonable case notes. Include catch up spots during the day to allow veterinarians to make follow up phone calls, etc.

Estimate fees for services so owners have an idea of what their bill will be.