

Submission
No 189

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Australasian Veterinary Boards Council

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Inquiry into Veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales



Submission from the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council Inc. (AVBC)

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Executive Summary

The Australasian Veterinary Boards Council Inc. (AVBC) promotes the integrity and sustainability of the veterinary profession in Australia and New Zealand. Recognising the current workforce shortage in the veterinary sector, particularly in rural and remote areas, AVBC established the Sustainable Practice Committee (SPC). One major step in addressing the shortage is the development of a National Veterinary Database to provide accurate information on the Australian veterinary workforce, which will help policymakers and researchers make informed decisions. Additionally, the AVBC focuses on maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce through accreditation and standards that align with international bodies. The AVBC also supports international mobility for local and overseas-trained veterinarians and improved regulation of veterinary nurses. Furthermore, the AVBC is working to address underlying factors contributing to the profession's burnout and mental health challenges by developing training and support programs. Harmonising veterinary legislation will support the current workforce and build resilience for future challenges. AVBC welcomes this Inquiry as collaboration between practitioners, professional organisations and the government is required to address the issues at play.

I. Introduction

The mission of the [Australasian Veterinary Boards Council Inc. \(AVBC\)](#) is to promote the integrity and sustainability of the veterinary profession. AVBC's voting members are the state and territory veterinary statutory boards in Australia and the Veterinary Council of New Zealand. The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) and New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) are non-voting members of Council. The Veterinary Practitioners Board of New South Wales (VPB NSW) is a voting member of AVBC.

Established in 1999, for the first 21 years AVBC's core activities focused on establishing clear minimum standards for veterinarians serving the public through:

- Accreditation of veterinary schools in Australia, New Zealand and overseas;
- Collaboration with equivalent international organisations to ensure mobility (International Accreditors Working Group);
- The Australasian Veterinary Examination where veterinary degrees are not assessed as equivalent to IAWG minimum standards;
- As the federally gazetted authority, skills assessment of veterinary qualifications for the purpose of immigration , and
- Assessment of specialists and specialist qualifications.

The shortage is particularly worrying in rural and remote areas due to the potential for:

- Severe animal welfare impacts arising from unprofessional services and scant professional monitoring and supervision of animal industries and private animal ownership
- Impaired emergency animal disease response (e.g., Foot and Mouth Disease, Lumpy Skin Disease, African Swine Fever)
- Impaired response to zoonotic diseases (e.g., Japanese encephalitis virus, Hendra virus)

In 2021, the AVBC closely examined its potential role in responding to the veterinary workforce shortage and created the Sustainable Practice Committee (SPC) to work on initiatives to improve sustainability of the profession. For SPC's numerous initiatives to effectively accomplish their intended impact, it is imperative to have funding and support from both state and federal governments. Therefore, the AVBC appreciates and welcomes this Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in NSW and the opportunity it can provide for collaboration to tackle the veterinary workforce shortage.

II. Terms of Reference

This submission will address the Terms of Reference relevant directly to the work of AVBC.

a) The Shortage of Veterinarians Across the Profession

The sector is experiencing a significant workforce shortage nationally and internationally, driven mainly by *attrition*.^{1,2,3} This has been exacerbated in recent times by a surge in demand for veterinary services from increasing pet ownership and changing attitudes towards pets and standards of veterinary care.^{4,5} Factors including ethical stressors, workplace culture and excessive working hours have contributed to burnout and mental illness in the profession.^{1,6} Although the total number of

¹ Arbe Montoya, A. H. (2021). Risk factors associated with veterinary attrition from clinical practice: a descriptive study. *Aust Vet J.*, 99: 495– 501.

² Australian Veterinary Association. (2021, December). AVA Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report. Retrieved from Australian Veterinary Association: <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2022/07/not-enough-veterinarians-animals/661497/>

⁴ Newgate Research. (2021). *Pets and the Pandemic*. Retrieved from Animal Medicines Australia: https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2021/08/AMAU005-PATPReport21_v1.4_WEB.pdf

⁵ Knesl, O. H. (2016). Opportunities for incorporating the human-animal bond in companion animal practice. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 249(1), 42-44.

⁶ Quain A, M. S. (2021). Frequency, Stressfulness and Type of Ethically Challenging Situations Encountered by Veterinary Team Members During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Front Vet Sci.*, 12;8:647108.

registered veterinarians in Australia is still growing, excessive demand and less full-time work are likely contributors.

At face value, Australian and New Zealand registration boards are well-placed to provide insights into the veterinary workforce, however multiple data sets, unknown time fractions (part-time or full time) and inability to track career mobility (to name a few) limit the ability of stakeholders to understand the nature of the current situation.

The AVBC has started developing a National Veterinary Database to provide accurate information on the Australian veterinary workforce. The advantages of such a database include increased visibility and accurate reporting of workforce data/trends, as well as rapid identification of veterinarian registration status and prompt access during an emergency response. An existing example of such a database is the Australian Teachers Workforce Data (ATWD)⁷, which is a joint initiative, funded by all state, territory and Commonwealth governments. The ATWD supports workforce modelling, planning, and identifies critical workforce issues by offering longitudinal trend data and a Key Metrics Dashboard. This data-driven approach helps inform education policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers in making informed decisions and developing strategies to address challenges and improve the teacher workforce in Australia. AVBC would welcome NSW Government funding and support to progress a similar initiative for the veterinary profession.

Recommendation:

That the NSW government supports the development of a National Veterinary Database.

b) Challenges in Maintaining a Sustainable Veterinary Workforce

Veterinary Education and Accreditation

⁷ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data>

The rapid establishment of new veterinary schools has strained university finances and staffing world-wide. This has exacerbated attrition in the education sector, as private specialist clinics have proliferated. Accreditation systems have responded by accommodating alternative clinical education models such as teaching in distributive practices and more recently, a transition of focus from specialist teaching to that of general practice.

The Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) accredits veterinary schools in Australia and New Zealand. Accreditation ensures that veterinary schools meet the standards set by the AVBC and produce graduates eligible for veterinary registration in Australasian jurisdictions. The AVBC's Accreditation Standards cover various aspects of veterinary education. The AVBC's Veterinary Schools Accreditation Advisory Committee (VSAAC) reviews the Standards every seven years. The latest comprehensive review of AVBC accreditation standards, Day One Competencies and support for transition to practice was carried out in 2022. Led by internationally recognised educators and incorporating broad stakeholder feedback, the new standards and competencies recognise the current international and local realities for students, educators and practitioners.^{8,9}

In a recently published report, the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand (VSANZ) recommended that accreditation processes should remove requirements that duplicate existing university processes and focus more on assessing learning outcomes rather than inputs.¹⁰ After AVBC's most recent Accreditation Standards Review, new Standards were developed which acknowledge this shift from inputs toward outcomes of veterinary education.¹¹ The AVBC is committed to ensuring that the accreditation process, while remaining rigorous, remains relevant to

⁸ <https://avbc.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AVBC-Accreditation-Standards-v1-2024.pdf>

⁹ https://avbc.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AVBC-Day-One-Competencies_Final_2024-v1-Jan-24.pdf

¹⁰ Veterinary Schools of Australia & New Zealand (VSANZ) (2023, July). Rethinking Veterinary Education.

https://vsanz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VSANZ_Rethinking-Vet-Ed_Low-Res-FINAL-CLEAN.pdf

¹¹ <https://avbc.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AVBC-Accreditation-Standards-v1-2024.pdf>

the needs of the profession. The new Standards and Competencies are a significant step forward in this regard.

The AVBC accreditation process is harmonised with other veterinary accreditation bodies worldwide. It ensures that Australian and New Zealand veterinary schools produce graduates meeting local legislative requirements *and* international standards. Accreditation also contributes to the attractiveness of Australasian universities for international students and allows global mobility for veterinary graduates.

The AVBC collaborates with other accrediting bodies, such as the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) and the American Veterinary Medical Association Council of Education (AVMA CoE). However, there is a need for commonality in standards and processes to avoid unnecessary compliance burdens on veterinary schools. With these concerns in mind, the next meeting of the International Accreditors Working Group (IAWG), which the AVBC co-leads, is in Melbourne in late July 2023.

Continuing Professional Development

AVBC's Sustainable Practice Committee (SPC) is working on initiatives to encourage ongoing engagement of veterinarians within the profession. In NSW, veterinarians are mandated to undertake continuing professional development (CPD) to maintain their registration. Historically, CPD has predominantly emphasised the acquisition of clinical knowledge and skills. However, the SPC is developing a new framework that member jurisdictions can adopt. This framework will encompass non-technical elements and a "Plan & Reflect" approach inspired by New Zealand's existing system. Introduction of this approach as well as a new graduate mentorship system and encouraging career-long supervision are the core building blocks upon which we can build a strong profession with improved organisational culture and aligned professional expectations to ensure continuing engagement (see Figure 2).

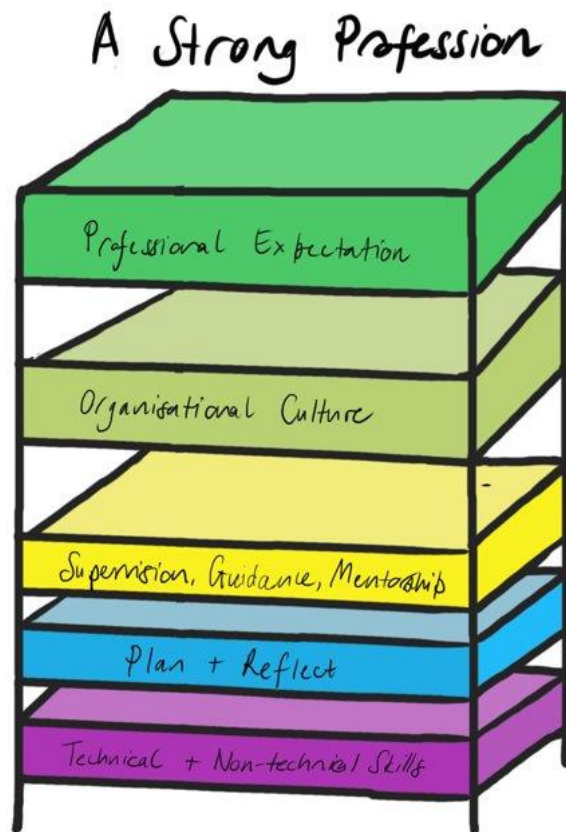


Figure 2: A Strong Veterinary Profession (Dr Z. Lenard)

International Mobility

The ability to travel domestically and internationally, enriches a veterinary career and allows movement of veterinarians to where need or opportunity is greatest. National Recognition of Veterinary Registration (NRVR) established by AVBC in 2005, facilitates free movement of registered veterinarians within Australia. The Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Agreement (TTMRA) supports mobility between Australia and New Zealand. The international accreditors working group, co-established by AVBC has built pathways for the international mobility of veterinarians amongst its members in Australia, New Zealand, USA, UK, South Africa and Europe. AVBC mentored the establishment of the ASEAN Veterinary Statutory Bodies Network and with it, a new accreditation system with links to ours. Several veterinary schools in the ASEAN region are approaching the level

of AVBC standards and will be accredited in the coming years. City University of Hong Kong will be first Asian veterinary school accredited by AVBC.

Accurate Data

A major challenge in creating a sustainable workforce is access to reliable data where trends in workforce participation can be tracked and the impact of interventions be quantified. See section (a) for details on AVBC's work to develop a Notional Veterinary Database.

c) Burnout and Mental Health Challenges

The concerning reports of anxiety, burn-out and suicide along with reported veterinary shortages galvanised the AVBC to establish the Sustainable Practice Committee in 2021. In researching the remit of the committee, AVBC noted complaints to the NSW veterinary board have increased (Figure 1). Rising complaints and client incivility is causing distress in vets, where they fear making mistakes and being reported to the board. To reduce some of this stress, AVBC is working with member boards to develop educational materials to improve transparency around regulatory processes.

New and finalised complaints 2007-2021



Figure 1: Complaints received by the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board from 2007-2021

It is important for any impairment in a veterinarian to be well managed to ensure that they can practise safely. AVBC, with member boards, has improved definitions related to impairment. AVBC is also developing training for Boards and their staff on how to communicate in psychologically safe ways with veterinarians and the public. The NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board has developed a policy and guideline describing its Health Program for veterinarians with impairment.^{12,13}

It is worth noting that the burnout facing the veterinary profession extends to veterinary regulators, AVBC staff and volunteers currently undertaking multiple important but under-resourced projects, the outcomes of which will benefit the profession. AVBC is funded at \$27.30 per registrant. Additional sources of funding for many of AVBC's projects would allow sufficient staffing to alleviate some of this pressure.

d) Role and Challenges Affecting Veterinary Nurses

Veterinary nurses and technicians comprise approximately 42% of the veterinary services workforce in Australia.¹⁰ Veterinary nurses (AQF level IV) and veterinary technicians (AQF level 7) have skills and knowledge that can significantly contribute to care of veterinary patients, yet they are only regulated in Western Australia at present. The World Organisation of Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE) recommends that all Veterinary Boards in Australia develop registration procedures for veterinary paraprofessionals.¹¹ Because there is no legislated definition of a veterinary nurse in NSW, anyone can claim to be one and perform their duties. Vet nurses & technicians have invaluable skills, but their lack of title protection, limited career options, and underutilisation is impacting animal welfare. Allowing them to perform more tasks can improve animal care and ease vet workload.

¹²<https://www.vpb.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/images/PR05%20Health%20Program%20for%20Veterinarians%20202009.pdf>

¹³<https://www.vpb.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/images/GR04%20Health%20Program%20for%20Veterinarians%201.pdf>

The AVBC's Sustainable Practice Committee (SPC) has investigated regulation of veterinary nurses in Australia. A survey conducted in 2022 indicated overwhelming support for veterinary nurse regulation, with 88% of respondents in favour.¹² The preferred option for regulation was state-based veterinary legislation defining a veterinary nurse/technician as a person with suitable qualifications who is registered with an **independent national body** such as the AVBC. Such an approach aligns with the principles of right-touch regulation.¹³ It offers the potential for a consistent regulatory framework across jurisdictions, and we encourage the NSW government to work with AVBC and the Veterinary Nurses' Council of Australia (VNCA) to advance this initiative.

In other jurisdictions around the world, additional allied veterinary professionals are regulated (e.g., veterinary physiotherapists, equine dental technicians)^{14,15} and this may be a means of futureproofing the capability of the veterinary sector here in Australia.

Recommendation: That the NSW government supports the regulation of veterinary nurses and technicians, and other allied veterinary professions to futureproof the capability of the sector

e) Role and Challenges Affecting Overseas Trained Veterinarians

AVBC provides a pathway for graduates of overseas schools, which have not been assessed as equivalent to AVBC standards, to gain registration in Australia & New Zealand via the Australasian Veterinary Examination (AVE). In 2022, forty-three veterinarians joined the Australian profession via the AVE.¹⁶ Many AVE candidates could receive mentorship from rural practices while they are

¹⁴ <https://www.avma.org/javma-news/2011-08-15/lay-equine-dentists-now-regulated-texas>

¹⁵ <https://savc.org.za/veterinary-physiotherapist/practicing-as-a-veterinary-physiotherapy/>

¹⁶ <https://avbc.asn.au/latest-news/avbc-announces-record-number-of-successful-australasian-veterinary-examination-ave-candidates-in-2022/>

studying, but the costs of relocating from their jobs and families in metropolitan areas can be prohibitive.

Recommendation: Financial incentives for AVE candidates would be welcomed to encourage them to consider working in rural areas of NSW.

f) Impact of providing after-hours veterinary services

AVBC is reviewing the impact of telehealth and other emerging technologies on the veterinary sector, including how these advancements can be utilised in out-of-hours situations.

g) Impact of Legislative and Regulatory Framework on Veterinarians

Harmonisation of Veterinary Legislation

The eight veterinary regulatory systems in Australia present several challenges, including varying scopes and requirements across jurisdictions. This inconsistency can be a barrier to workforce mobility and hinder emergency animal disease responses. Given the evolving landscape marked by rapid technological advancements, increased population mobility, globalisation, and effects of climate change, there is a growing need for uniform national veterinary legislation that empowers innovation in the veterinary sector, allows new and better ways to regulate, as well as supporting regulation of additional allied veterinary professions so that the sector is future proofed. AVBC's Model Veterinary Act Working Group is developing key principles for model legislation. State and federal government support will be key to achieving legislative reform.

Recommendation: That NSW government supports the AVBC Model Act Working Group in its aim to harmonise and modernise veterinary legislation in Australia.

h) The particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

AVBC supports the AVA's position on educational fee relief to encourage early career veterinarians to work in rural NSW, similar to initiatives that exist for other professions in rural areas of NSW (e.g., medical and paramedical workers).

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

Veterinarians often provide care to injured wildlife and stray companion animals and these costs cannot be recovered, placing a financial burden on veterinary clinics.

Recommendation: That the NSW Government works with the VPB NSW and AVBC's Model Act Working Group to develop legislation to better support veterinarians in these situations.

j) The impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others

Fluctuations in the supply of veterinarians can significantly affect animal welfare, the economy, and organisations supporting animal welfare. Emergencies like bushfires, floods, and biosecurity breaches can severely impact the economy and the animal agribusiness industry. Changes in industry structure, a shift towards part-time work, and evolving companion animal ownership trends have likely contributed to the current undersupply.

Reliable data is required to support interventions to ensure the retention of high animal welfare standards. A well-resourced National Veterinary Database will be key to maintaining public confidence in the years ahead.

k) Current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations

The concept of [“spectrum of care”](#) or [“contextualised care”](#) is central to current clinical training of veterinarians (See AVBC Day One Competencies).⁹ The new generation of veterinarians are able to offer services personalised to the individual animal and/or owner’s situation.

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 New South Wales

See sections (a) to (e) above

m) Strategies to improve access to veterinary care

By embracing many of the initiatives outlined above, it is hoped that the result will be improved access to veterinary care for all the community.

III. Conclusion

In response to fluctuations in the veterinary workforce, the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council Inc. (AVBC) continues to promote the sustainability and integrity of the profession. Funding and developing a National Veterinary Database is crucial for obtaining accurate workforce data, implementing effective workforce planning strategies, maintaining accreditation standards and supporting international mobility for a well-prepared and globally competent veterinary workforce.

Addressing burnout and mental health challenges in veterinarians requires cooperation between governments, AVBC, regulators, professional bodies and practitioners. Improved regulation of veterinary nurses, support of overseas-trained veterinarians and harmonising veterinary legislation across jurisdictions will strengthen the workforce, ensure animal welfare and support workforce mobility in the veterinary sector. By working collaboratively with state and federal governments, the AVBC endeavours to work effectively within its remit towards a sustainable, indeed thriving, veterinary profession in Australasia.