

**Submission
No 195**

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

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The Shortage of Veterinarians

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Introduction

I offer my submission as a fourth-generation veterinarian who qualified in 1975 from Liverpool UK and is now an Australian citizen. I have worked in many different areas of the profession across 23 countries, primarily in hands-on roles working with animals and their owners/handlers.

After having been a partner in a mixed practice in UK, I first worked in Australia in 1998 (in practice) later worked for MLA for 5 years in the Middle East and retired from full-time government service with Local Land Services in Glen Innes in 2022.

I have Honorary Life Membership of the Mongolian Veterinary Association and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Nowadays, I am active in training, including guest lecturer for several universities, advisory work, animal welfare and wildlife rescue. Importantly, I still retain immense pride, enthusiasm and satisfaction from being a vet which I put down to the variety of roles throughout my career and my view that it is a true 'vocation'.

Since graduating, I have worked in many countries and witnessed major shifts in the profession, as well as the changes in society and its values. Over recent years I have become really disappointed in the way the profession is changing in Australia, both significant contributors to the current veterinary situation.

Thoughts

a) shortage of practising veterinarians

I believe the shortage of practising veterinarians is primarily related to weak student selection.

Having achieved my dream and working in my local practice (where I had spent every possible minute since I was fourteen), I wrote a prize-winning veterinary article a few years after graduating. In this I observed that the high scientific requirements in student selection criteria and the intense scientific training allowed for little recognition that a major part of a practising veterinarian's role was their relationship with people. There appeared to be no selection investigation of student capabilities and no course training in sociological aspects. I believe this is significantly more of an issue today.

I left that first 'dream' job being disenchanted by the demands of the public – primarily unrealistic pet-owners.

Not the most scholarly of my year but seeking increased professional satisfaction and having 'mastered the basics', I received a scholarship for my MSc in Tropical Animal Production and Health and it opened access to an exhilarating career path (one I had never imagined). When I returned to general practice after several years overseas, the same stressors recurred - the demands of practice – especially an increasing abuse of out-of-hours service for trivial cases and complaints about charges), business (for which I had received no training at either school nor university) and balancing business and private life. Critically, I recognised effects on my family and veterinary partners, as well, all rooted in the same problems, so I left practice.

Returning to clinical practice every few years while working overseas in non-practice roles, I found the stressors to be increasing over time. After one year in a rural practice in NSW 10 years ago (where I was the only male), I found the stressors to be intolerable. They were –

- a sort of boredom of dealing with mundane companion-animal problems and owners who don't take real responsibility for care of their animals;
- continual barrage of emotion from unrealistic pet owners including some horse-owners (professional owners of animals such as farmers were rarely problematical in this sense);
- constant emotional pressure from nurses in the clinic over cases;
- pressure from a veterinary colleague (not the practice owner but a very recent lady graduate) to work-up cases and utilise adjunct diagnostic techniques to increase revenue (despite almost 40 years clinical experience);
- financial considerations – I found it hard to defend high charges when I considered procedures unnecessary;
- remuneration – after a life-time's experience and constant training, my financial reward is beggarly - my undergraduate grandson started his first (non-veterinary) job at over double my salary.

b) challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates.

I feel the factors identified above are colluding (alongside others) and create dissatisfaction in many vets causing them to leave the profession.

Considering the high percentage of females graduates and their biological clocks, it inevitably means that a significant number will take time off for maternity leave. Those returning to veterinary work in due course will probably limit their availability to cater for family-life/motherhood. The sudden vast change in male:female ratio among students occurred while I was at University primarily as a result of the popularity of the profession due to the success of 'James Herriott' books and the demise of the student interview system. Apparently young ladies were more able to achieve high grades for university entrance than young men at the same age which skewed intake proportions.

A significant part of the traditional ethos of a vet is being a trusted advisor/friend for clients who can revisit the same vet. Modern practices with many part-time vets does not provide this service. I have witnessed many situations where clients bemoan lack of continuity of treatment.

Increasingly problematical for retention is the need for both members of a 'family partnership' to find suitable employment to achieve 'adequate' income. Options are limited in much of rural Australia when there is a high probability that both members are highly intelligent / qualified individuals. The need for quality hospitals, schools and 'social life' for both partners further complicates both recruitment and retention.

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

As identified earlier, I believe a highly significant factor is imperfect student selection for modern professional veterinarians and am aware of veterinary students committing suicide.

Modern society has become increasingly influenced by rights and expectations and modern vet students are far less self-reliant than they used to be.

Universities are not encouraging initiative (hiding behind a raft of politically-correct edicts). In one university laboratory, I recently guided animal science students through an investigation of pregnant fetuses (obtained from a slaughterhouse) and lamb post-mortems when students were not allowed to use knives or scalpels but forced to use inadequately sized scissors.

Three years ago, I referred one student 'seeing practice' with me to a counsellor because she was showing signs I felt were indicative of depression. Thankfully the counsellor was able to help her. With her permission I notified the University on the feedback form and asked someone to contact me – I am still waiting! A few months later I did receive a letter from the University asking me to take another student so replied that I would not until they contacted me about the student. No further communication from them. I met the young vet after qualifying and she was much more 'alive' but I do have long-term concerns for her mental health.

I was recently made aware of two non-veterinary students suspended for upsetting an American student, based purely on the visitor's complaint without either being able to give their own version of events nor call for independent witnesses (After legal representation the suspension was quashed but I know one of the girls involved and she remains severely traumatised by the official handling of the incident.)

In essence, the interest of some universities seems to be much more focussed on the fees than the product.

Critical to burn-out and mental health are having other non-veterinary interests and support. This has long been an issue with vets being primarily focussed on their profession and family and having no other significant outlet. I believe plays a significant role in the problems of the profession.

I fear the professional support network is too impersonal these days. Modern life throws a constant barrage of 'negativity' and 'mindlessness' at everyone, seems to generate unrealistic demands of time usage and create an unreasonable level of pressure by expectation of perfection. Added to the veterinary pressures, I think this challenge proves intolerable to a significant percentage of veterinarians, especially those in small animal practice, who anticipate having their own practice for life.

As such, the structure of the profession must change because newer graduates will quickly see that having their own practice is unrealistic.

(d) the role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses

I have great respect for many nurses but also feel that many are so highly emotional in their love for animals that they are creating unrealistic expectation in clinics. In my own experiences some can make life hell for vets (and other nurses or staff) and this can lead to work-place difficulties. It appears to me that only a small percentage of qualified vet nurses remain in the role their whole career.

There appear various categories –

- those who want to work with animals but then leave after a few years in practice and take-up unrelated work,
- those who use their animal training in other spheres of the animal industry,
- a small percentage who remain as nurses for their whole career.

With only limited experience working with nurses over the last 15 years I can contribute little.

(e) the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians

Veterinary education varies immensely between countries – I have worked with vets of many nations – but, critically, so too do the ethical and moral standards. Sadly, I would not trust the word (or signature) of vets from many countries where the whole nation appears to function on systems founded in graft, lies and using your position to obtain advantage. In some countries, the thought processes of their educational processes do not teach vet students to develop diagnostic and analytical skills commensurate with high veterinary standards. I believe stringent controls are required to ensure that standards in Australia are not lowered by importing veterinarians who cannot meet our own high level.

(f) the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services

I recently had occasion to find a vet on a Sunday morning in Brisbane. A website on my phone indicated that only two practices were open, all the others offered 'No service'. In conversations, I quite often get complaints about extortionate charges/call-out fees for after-hours service and many of these relate to dissatisfaction with the service and gross overcharging for minimal input.

On the other side of the coin, many call-outs in my career have been non-life-threatening but have been for the client's convenience because they work late or just got in from a social engagement.

I seriously believe that the provision of medical services, surgery and drugs, etc to human patients without the patients seeing the full associated costs is detrimental to both the veterinary and medical professions. Medicare and other financial support mechanisms shield most people from the real costs of health care and the costs of providing a complete service. I have long felt that people's medical bills should itemise the costs to make people aware of the magnitude of costs.

(g) the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians

Regretfully, I believe this is very weak in Australia.

I can see no logical reason why each State has its own Board replicating costly bureaucracy.

I do not feel the NSW Board does a very good job and I am left with a feeling that the overall framework serves as protectionism for the profession rather than working for its best interests. Several years ago, I phoned to report the case of a horse that died of peritonitis after castration by a lay person who had obtained controlled substances for the job from a veterinarian. After an initial unsatisfactory conversation with the 'telephonist', I asked for the appropriate person to contact me but I heard from o-one.

A significant review of the legislation covering veterinary activity is required, hopefully removing the vagaries of State and Territory variations. The original purpose of veterinary and welfare legislation was to protect animals but I believe this has been superseded by protecting professional interests.

Over the last 50 years, large parts of what was once veterinary activity have been adopted as normal activity by other groups. Diagnosis and prescription is frequently undertaken by lay staff in stock and station agents', by nutritionists, by physiotherapists, etc without communicating with the veterinarian. Many lay people move between properties castrating stock, doing pregnancy diagnoses, farriery, hoof-trimming, dentistry, *inter al.* I understand that many of these people undertaking activities are not licensed appropriately.

Shortly after graduating, I advocated that lay personnel should be affiliated to a veterinary practice and be accountable to that practice - like the farriers in my grand-father's and great-grandfather's practices. There are probably now far too many disciplines for this to become adopted.

Legal limitations on the sale of some categories of drugs allow veterinarians to sell them with significant mark-up. I have always felt uncomfortable with this but believe the problem is getting worse.

Despite the Biosecurity Act 2015 (for NSW) and others, I do not believe there is adequate application of its contingencies by the government. Weeds and feral animals are a major cause of concern in Australia, yet many individuals and authorities make little or no attempt to comply with legal requirements. Roadsides and urban areas are prime examples where costs and lack of staff are cited as why effective action is not undertaken. On properties, the same reasons are given while absentee landlords and those with 'moral' objections to chemicals or killing are allowed to get away with not carrying-out effective biosecurity controls. There appears to be very little application of the Act.

Similarly, POCTA and other legislation does not appear to be adequately applied. Companion animals suffer from mental health issues because family members are away all day; all too often herding and flocking animals are kept in solitary confinement, e.g. wild birds; 'hoarders' keep unrealistic numbers of animals and birds (including wildlife) often in squalid conditions.

Despite professional confidentiality, veterinarians are legally required to report dog-fighting injuries in many countries. I believe many other illegal activities involving animal welfare should also be reported.

In my UK practice life, I was licensed as a "Local Veterinary Inspector" (LVI) by the Government for specific official activities, including collecting samples for notifiable disease investigations, premises inspections and export certifications. In Australia I have worked for LLS and RLPB in NSW - evolutions of the unique service of government inspectors and advisors- and rate the role of that veterinary service very highly. I believe a similar countrywide service would provide great benefits but also think there is significant potential for rural vets to be appointed in a similar LVI role with established fees for specific tasks. The benefits of this are many.

Biosecurity is a significant issue in rural Australia, including control of feral animals. I have found that lay comprehension of this subject is weak and there are frequent

misapprehensions and glaring variations in application – some deliberate, others out of ignorance. I do not envisage that there should be a user-pays approach to every aspect of LVI activity but I sincerely believe that having a closer relationship between vets and animal owners would be highly beneficial. I believe that there has been a significant decline in the number of face-to-face contacts between vets and especially producers because of the perceived high costs of veterinary visits and the absence of material benefits so that many see visits to allow antibiotic supply as a money-making exercise. On-farm veterinarians should be able to provide meaningful advice in this area.

Pest control measures are expensive and, in NSW, LLS seeks funds for a variety of techniques but this would inevitable come at the expense of funding in other areas of Primary Industries, e.g. research. The potential for conflict around this topic is immense and exacerbates the urban-rural divide when so many people seek a single solution to complex multi-factorial problems. I am also unconvinced that LLS and DPI should be parallel organisations, preferring that LLS should be a subsidiary of DPI – its field arm.

Personally, I think the time has come for a Biosecurity tax for arrivals in Australia and that those perpetrating crimes should be required to pay far larger fines to cover the costs of investigation and reports. I also feel that more emphasis should be placed on making the public aware of disease spread by vehicles etc by having mandatory wash-down stations out of designated Control Zones for specific pathogens.

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

I have long considered that financial remuneration could be significantly influenced by strategic amelioration of tax for postings in selected locations. Veterinary scholarships could also be used to provide further qualification if carried out in conjunction with a commitment to work in rural Australia for a specified time. As identified earlier, my own MSc scholarship and a tour in North Yemen changed my life. However, this could merely be changing the tune as the Titanic sinks and does not address other fundamental issues across the profession.

I believe a role similar to that of UK's LVI (explained earlier) would be highly beneficial.

- As a veterinarian working in remote areas for much of my life, including North Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Mongolia, I can attest to the value of meaningful professional contact. I believe there is significant potential for a 'Rural Deans' program which provide face-to-face support whereby individual vets have a visiting, caring mentor to help them achieve personal goals and 'sanity'. This could be through applied clinical research, study programs and other components of career and personal development.

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

Far too many members of society expect someone else to do what they are not prepared to do – they say it is not their responsibility. The local vet practice is widely used as the first stop for these animals. Some charities obtain vast sums of money by advertising their services but I am disappointed by the amount of this fund reaching the field with far too much spent on bureaucracy and advertising and precious little being provided to people in the field – vets *inter al.*

While I voluntarily look after wildlife at no charge, I have long believed it is immoral to expect veterinarians to foot the bill for treatment of strays or wildlife. Over the years I have met an increasing number of 'carers' with unrealistic expectations for treatment, unwilling to pay themselves and with funding not available. It frequently leads to accusations of veterinary greed and adds further stress on veterinarians.

I also find that many younger veterinarians are not confident in treating species outside the norm of their experience and potentially for legal concerns will not 'step up to the mark' with unusual animals or species.

I believe this will have significant effects when foot and mouth disease or other major exotic disease arrives in Australia and younger vets will not want to help in any control program. It remains to be seen how we will provide enough veterinarians to mount an effective control program. I voluntarily returned to UK in 2001 (taking leave without pay) because of their desperate veterinary shortage with British small animal vets continuing in their day-to-day work while the epizootic raged.

(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

The increase of 'no-kill' sanctuaries and vociferous groups demanding removal of cull policies on feral animals adds to the problem of dealing with multi-factorial issues such as strays, ferals and wildlife conservation.

The shortage of veterinarians means an increased workload for those available and lack of time for 'charity' work in these areas.

Accepting that many younger veterinarians believe in no-kill policies and are intent on keeping animals alive as long as possible at all costs, I believe this detracts from the profession because it enhances unrealistic expectations among companion animal owners. This heightened emotion is detrimental to animal welfare – not to mention its adverse effects on human interaction when people use animals as a substitute for relationships with their own species.

Personally, I feel that the agribusiness industry has a different perspective to the veterinary sector. Trying to maximise profit, many in the agribusiness frontline with producers will employ whatever technique they can to sell product. Diagnosis and selling treatments or nutritional supplements is performed with poor comprehension of legality, need or long-term effects (e.g. drench resistance). Sadly I see many companion-animal veterinarians following this trend.

Breeders should not be a difficulty. Routine inspections following a well-designed protocol by an LVI (preferably not the client's own veterinarian) should eliminate the undesirable elements and facilities. Difficult cases can be referred to a specialist inspector.

Social media allows a complete sub-culture of arm-chair veterinarians to diagnose disease and prescribe treatments to the detriment of animal welfare.

(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

It is a feature of modern life that many people expect the right to everything they desire, including animals, without taking into account costs associated with that - veterinary availability and costs, transportation costs, etc. The ever-increasing number of mechanisms to support people through life without their ever having to pay-back is demoralising and is a contributing cause of the current veterinary predicaments.

I have found that many who expect 'support' for veterinary services in urban areas are able to afford luxuries that I forego. Many, many are the cases where I have been told total lies by people seeking reduced fees and the number of debtors in various practices has increased over time.

I do not know how to overcome this feature of modern life and my sympathy for such people has severely diminished over time.

The scenario in rural Australia is different in many ways but a recent free vaccination day by a visiting charity in my home-town allowed me to see many well-to-do locals getting multiple vaccines for their animal at the expense of the local practice. Surely there can be a more cost-effective way in which local practices can deliver vaccines for the charity so that both parties achieve their objectives.

In my opinion, far too much lip-service is paid to the concept of animal welfare and claims of hardship among animal owners. Far too many stockowners have abysmal stockmanship skills and are not prepared to buy extra feed in times of drought when their land is overstocked. They are repeat offenders in animal welfare abuse every time the circle of poor grazing seasons come around and receive little or no penalty. Even if stock are seized, they receive income after associated costs are deducted. There is no mechanism to make such atrocious managers maintain standards after adequate training or undergo routine audits to ensure they keep sustainable stocking densities. This negates the whole concept of responsible animal ownership.

Similarly, much is made of the welfare of dogs in remote areas and their relationship with indigenous people. While I agree that the relationship between man and companion animals is beneficial, I also think that individuals have a responsibility to look after the animals from which they derive benefit. Wildlife is supposedly revered by indigenous Australians (although there are many who contravene protective hunting legislation by excessive hunting/fishing for pecuniary gain) and yet their stockmanship skills are generally low. Surely the veterinary profession is there to serve animals and to speak on their behalf, not make excuses for those who have neither the interest nor skills and application to respect the basic requirement of all animals.

All Australians, regardless of colour or creed, should abide within the law of the land and it serves no person or no animal, in the long-term, to have different standards for different sub-groupings with respect for animal welfare.

(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

- Improve student selection processes to create a better modern graduate – do not base selection purely on academic criteria but based on suitability for a lifelong ‘vocation’.
- Provide training that meets current needs for a sustainable profession with respect to business skills and mental health as well as diagnostic and therapeutic acumen.
- Widen the use of ‘Authorised Veterinary Inspectors’ to include practising veterinarians.
- Use tax incentives for selected areas of the country.
- Develop scholarship programmes with specific aims.
- Encourage the adoption of energy medicine by veterinarians as a cost effective and highly beneficial healing mechanism.
- The local Veterinary Associations I enjoyed in UK provided training and social inter-action while creating a local support-network that is widely missing in Australia. Remote learning does not supply the same needs and, while the tyranny of distance must be considered, the concept of face-to-face meetings appears to have fallen from veterinary psyche.
- Having utilised ‘tele-health’ in many developing countries, there is no formal mechanism in Australia. I believe this is a serious oversight and leads to a serious abuse of veterinary legislation where social media and ‘Google’ are widely used by unqualified individuals to promote misconceptions and hawk remedies of dubious provenance. The net result is frequent animal welfare concerns.
- Creation of a ‘Rural Deans’ mentor program to assist career and personal development.

(m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care

- Essentially, I feel that the veterinary profession is best served by a free-market economy however, I believe that much of the country is so far removed from centres of civilisation that economic survival of a local practice is unlikely. It seems to me that government could influence this by assorted mechanisms such as tax thresholds and grants as well as allowing practitioners to provide multiple fee-paying roles within their community, e.g. meat inspection, delivery of preventative vaccination and spaying programmes etc, as well as research activities. Funding for these could come from multiple sources including charities and business ventures.
- NSW alone has its Local Land Services which does allow on-farm access to advisory veterinarians on herd and flock issues. This system, despite its flaws, could be developed to advantage for rural Australia, especially if it were more aligned as a field arm of DPI rather than a stand-alone entity.

(n) any other related matter

- Veterinary diagnostic equipment is expensive and yet many veterinary practices insist on having their own or going to complete referral rather than adopting a half-way house of having specialist diagnostic venues or sharing costly equipment.
- Fresh meat supply in rural areas is hampered by the costs of processing to ‘International Standards’. A sympathetic re-assessment of saleable meat in rural areas by low-output slaughterhalls using Local Vet Inspectors and ‘Domestic Standards’ would legalise the current widespread practice of individuals butchering their own animals and selling the meat on the black-market.

Conclusion

I have tried to group my thoughts under appropriate headings but know some will appear way out of left field.

I recognise that a thriving profession must change in response to the demands of society but remain committed to the belief that the veterinary profession should remain, above all, committed to the best interests of animals. I believe that this is currently not the case for far too many members of the profession and is reflected in the problems it now faces.

For me, the fundamental cause of this is weak student selection and inappropriate university training so that, over time, our leaders and decision-makers have been guiding us along a pathway that has created the weaknesses we see nowadays.

I hope my observations are pertinent and useful and I would be happy to assist further.

Nigel Brown