

Submission  
No 196

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

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

## Submission to the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW

I am a female veterinarian who graduated from Sydney University 37 years ago. After a brief stint in private clinical practice, I spent the majority of my younger years in pathology laboratories (government, university and private). Since 1998, my veterinarian husband has been a partner or sole owner of a private mixed practice in regional NSW and I have assisted him in this endeavour.

### Terms of Reference:

- a) *The shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry and pathology*

I wrote an 8-page letter about this topic at the end of 2021, which I sent to all Australian universities with a veterinary school, the Australian Veterinary Association, the Centre for Veterinary Education, the Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW, the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, and the Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists. I will send that letter in a separate email in case any of you want some bedtime reading, bearing in mind that 2 years on, some things have changed (but not many). I will try and keep this submission more succinct.

Although there are many reasons for the current veterinary shortage, I believe the main ones to be:

**The ‘feminisation of the profession’ or lack of gender diversity.** In my graduating class of 1986, for the first time there more than 50% females. The intakes now, and for the past 20 years or so, are around 90% female. The majority of females do not return to full-time work, regardless of the job/profession, after having children, at least until the children are much older. This is not sexism, it is simply facts and figures. When a profession is highly feminised, those figures have an enormous impact on the number of available workers. I, myself, have not worked full-time since the birth of my first child in 1996, although as I approach 60 years of age, I am working more in our practice than I ever have before. 30% gender diversity seems to be the ‘magic number’ quoted in various sources.

**Possible solutions** – Graduate more (double the number of) veterinary students; understand why males are not applying to vet schools (I think there has been a recent study by students at Adelaide University on this topic); encourage/offer incentives for males to study veterinary science; have targets/quotas for enrolling male students.

**The teaching at universities.** I feel the current teaching methods are not empowering students to become competent and confident clinicians and surgeons. Recent graduates feel inept at many procedures/diagnostics when in fact, they are quite capable. They think procedures that they could actually perform, should be referred to a specialist. They expect to be good at everything from day 1 and get disappointed/frustrated when they are not. This can lead to them questioning their career as a generalist very early and deciding to specialise instead. The lack of surgical experience whilst at university does nothing to help this feeling. The final year of a veterinary degree at most Australian universities is comprised of placements at veterinary clinics. The amount of surgery performed during this time is highly variable and many students graduate after not having performed routine surgery (e.g. desexings) for up to 12 months. Recent graduates are reluctant to make provisional diagnoses and treatment plans without many, many tests, which increases costs to the client.

**Possible solutions** – More involvement of successful, content, private practitioners in university teaching; overhaul of university teaching (I know there has been a recent review on “Rethinking Veterinary Education”, but it is rather long and I have not read it yet!); more emphasis on gaining surgical skills whilst at university and on placement, including a return to non-survival surgery performed on animals destined for euthanasia.

**The advent of veterinary specialists.** As a profession, we are at risk of having an inverse pyramid, with more clinical specialists than general practitioners. Our affluent society has allowed this massive increase in specialists. The teaching at universities, together with the millennial generation's belief that they cannot treat certain species/conditions without specialisation, and the misconception that this is the only way to earn a good living, all perpetuate this proliferation.

**Possible solutions** – Make it harder to become a veterinary clinical specialist (this would not include preclinical specialisation such as pathology, epidemiology, microbiology); place limits on the number of veterinary clinical specialists able to be registered, such as in human medicine; new graduates must spend a minimum amount of time in general practice (maybe 3 years?) before being allowed to work in a specialist practice or begin specialist training.

**Generational change.** Younger people across the board, not just in the veterinary field, are much more about 'work-life balance' than previous generations. They do not want to work as hard or as long as their predecessors.

**Possible solutions** – None come to mind!

**High attrition rate.** I do not believe this is primarily due to **remuneration and hours** worked, despite what many say. Or if it is, I think some people have too high expectations. A 4-day working week is the norm for most full-time vets these days. The days themselves may be long, but over the week or roster cycle, most vets are working, on average, their 38 hours (or close to it). The current Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award has very specific guidelines about pay, time off, overtime, weekend work, after hours etc, etc, so if employed vets are not happy with their lot, they can either negotiate with their employer or simply walk away. They will easily find employment in another vet practice in this economic climate. People should not enter a profession such as veterinary science (or medicine, or nursing, or...) and expect the work to be 9 to 5, Monday to Friday – this is unrealistic.

The HAYS Salary Guide FY23-24 (which does not include professions such as medicine, dentistry or veterinary science), indicates professions such as architecture, law, teaching, allied health (radiography/sonography, occupational therapy, speech therapy, physiotherapy), psychology and accounting, are all similarly or less well remunerated than employed vets in private practice (I doubt any veterinary employer is paying the award wage currently – the majority are paying well above). Nursing is usually paid less, engineering is usually paid more. I know that many associate lawyers/solicitors graduated for a comparable time, work much longer hours than many associate vets for similar pay. An owner/partner in a vet practice will be earning a considerably higher amount and will probably also be working much longer than 38 hours/week. Most vet practices operate as small businesses, so will never be able to offer the large salaries to employees that big business can offer, unless there is an ownership stake in the practice.

Attrition may be due to working conditions other than remuneration and hours worked, such as **expectation of performance, physical demands, client interactions and performing euthanasia.** These issues come with the job and usually require learned, special skill sets to be able to deal with them.

**Possible solutions** – More teaching at universities (or prior) about the realities of the job, such as conflict resolution.

I believe the veterinary shortage is being felt most in regional, rural and remote areas; in large animal/mixed clinical practice; in government spheres, such as Local Land Services; and in pathology laboratories. I feel it is having less of an impact in academia and industry.

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

Much of this will be discussed in other areas, but I think selection of students is relevant here.

Being a vet requires a high level of intelligence and problem-solving ability, thus university entry into a veterinary course should reflect this. I know some of these exceptionally bright students, who are unused to failure, will not make good clinicians – but many will. If emphasis for selection is placed preferentially on practical experience or an interview system, then I feel many high-quality candidates will miss out. It has been suggested that selecting purely on academic achievement preferences females – and that is probably true, especially in NSW where the English mark must be counted in the ATAR. However, the I believe the interview system also preferences females (especially over 18-year-old, ineloquent males).

**Possible solutions** – Select on HSC (or equivalent) marks, but with a prerequisite (not just recommendation) of doing at least 2 units of Maths and 2 units of Science and having these counted in the entry score (English should not have to be part of the score if other subjects have scored higher); forget about practical experience (some of the best associates in our mixed practice have come from capital cities with no/minimal production animal experience); forget about CASPER (etc) tests (unless to exclude a potential axe-murderer) and interviews (what the student is at 18 years old does not show what they will be in 5 or 6 years' time); some sort of written 'commitment statement' or subject essay would be okay; give the veterinary profession an image makeover in the public media, highlighting the pros of the job, not just the cons.

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

These are not just problems for the veterinary profession but for wider western/1<sup>st</sup> world society. I think burn-out is more a factor for practice owners/sole practitioners than employees these days, with better working conditions, a large choice of veterinary positions and a lot of industry support. Compassion fatigue and conflict resolution are still issues for most vets.

**Possible solutions** – Vets to work in a supportive environment with a friendly team; maintain access to mental health support; try working in a mixed/large animal practice where attending outside calls and being on the road, allows escape from the intensity of the clinic and time to defuse; sole practitioners reconsider working alone vs working in a multi-person practice where they can have more time off and get more support.

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

In the past, even when it was getting difficult to find vets, vet nurses (trained or untrained) were easy to come by. Recently, it is becoming difficult to find vet nurses for a position. I think the registration of vet nurses will only exacerbate this issue and we will not only have a vet shortage, but a vet nurse shortage as well. Some of our best vet nurses have been 'on the job' trained and have no formal qualifications.

*f) The arrangements and impacts of providing after-hours veterinary services*

Our clinic provides its own 24-hour, after-hours emergency service. Whilst most of our vets would probably say they would rather not do it (although I know some who say they actually enjoy it!), it is not a significant barrier to working in our practice. If vets want to live and work in a regional/rural area, then it is expected that after-hours is part of the job. We (and they, for the most part) feel they are adequately compensated for it, with respects to both remuneration and time off. If 24-hour care

is not provided, this results in an enormous animal welfare issue, especially for large animals, which cannot be easily transported to another centre. After hours care becomes more of an issue in regional/rural areas when one practice in a town does after hours, and others do not. The practice doing its own after hours will invariably see a lot of the other practices' after hours, thus increasing the workload on that particular practice. The NSW Veterinary Practitioners Code of Professional Conduct NSW has a statement on after hours care, and there should be greater enforcement of these responsibilities. In areas/cases where it is possible, even in capital cities, if practices share the after hours between them, the load is also shared.

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

Vets in these areas have been facing this challenge for the past 15-20 years – it seems only because the vet shortage has now impacted cities that it is being given the attention that it deserves. Animal welfare, veterinarian welfare, practice succession planning, closure of veterinary practices, exotic/emergency disease outbreaks are all critical matters affected by the vet shortage.

*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*

For the latter, the most important barrier is the lack of vets! (Especially large animal ones.) For members of the public with lower incomes, I think some of the more recently graduated vets who have trouble giving owners options which are less than 'gold standard' (reflecting the current teaching at universities), is a barrier. The quickness of vets to refer more involved cases (medical or surgical) to specialists, instead of having a go themselves, greatly increases the cost to clients.

*l) Strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practicing veterinarians in regional, rural and remote NSW*

Some of these have already been proposed above, however, in addition:

**HECS relief/Financial incentives.** For those who spend a certain amount of time in regional, rural or remote Australia. This could be on a sliding scale i.e. the longer someone works in these areas, the less HECS they pay. There could also be a 'stick' approach, as well as the 'carrot' – if a newly graduated vet did not work in practice in any location for a certain length of time after graduating (maybe 3 years?), then their HECS debt would be increased. Consider some sort of bonding/cadetships, such as used to happen with the Department of Agriculture.

Well, I got it down to less than half the size of my letter!