

**Submission
No 197**

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

Organisation: RSPCA NSW

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Introduction

RSPCA NSW operates three veterinary practices in NSW, located in Sydney, Rutherford and Broken Hill. The practices employ approximately 40 veterinarians and 40 veterinary nurses who are assisted by an additional 30 administrative and animal care team members. The practices deliver, almost exclusively, small animal veterinary care.

The veterinary teams employed by RSPCA NSW deliver veterinary services to a broad range of patients. The Sydney and Rutherford hospitals are connected to RSPCA NSW's two largest animal shelters. Each year, the vet teams provide veterinary treatment to approximately 14,000 shelter animals that are received by RSPCA as surrendered or stray. Approximately 1,000 animals, the subject of cruelty investigation, are examined and treated by RSPCA veterinarians annually, who attend Inspectorate operations in the field, assess, triage, and treat animals in the field, assist in the collection of evidence both in the field and via ongoing assessment and treatment at the shelter or veterinary clinic and provide expert witness opinion.

All RSPCA NSW veterinary hospitals treat privately owned animals presented by the public as full fee-paying clientele. The RSPCA Broken Hill veterinary clinic predominately has a private clientele but also supports local council work and the RSPCA NSW Inspectorate. All RSPCA NSW veterinary hospitals offer a range of subsidised and free veterinary services for vulnerable, underserved, and financially constrained members of the community through a range of on-site programs and outreach activities.

RSPCA NSW veterinarians are also called upon to assist in emergency response and recovery activities, having provided animal care in bushfire and flood-impacted regions of NSW over recent years.

RSPCA NSW also employs veterinarians to fulfill non-clinical roles including those associated with policy development, management, research, industry, and government advisory functions.

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

It is strikingly evident that there is a deficit in the number of veterinarians in NSW available to meet the demand for employment within the profession. This deficit is most visible in clinical practice settings where practitioners report working long hours, being unable to fill shifts, being booked out

long in advance and, in some cases, temporary or permanent closures of practices due to staff shortages leading to large areas of NSW having no access to veterinary services at all.¹

A 2021 veterinary industry survey indicated that almost 80% of respondents working in a practice setting had been, or were still, seeking to employ a veterinarian. In over 30% of these cases, recruitment had taken over 12 months to succeed or was ongoing.²

The apparent supply deficit may result from both an increase in demand for veterinary services as well as a decrease in the availability of veterinarians. As the total number of veterinarians registered in Australia has not declined over at least the last five years,^{2,3} the veterinary shortage is likely to be associated with fewer veterinarians choosing to work in the veterinary field or in clinical practice, and fewer of those engaging in full time hours of work. This comes at a time when companion animal ownership has increased⁴ and a high degree of veterinary involvement is required in livestock industries to maximise production, oversee health, welfare and biosecurity challenges and meet regulatory requirements.

The available data support the position that there is a functional shortage of vets due to both a growing demand for services and as a result of vets leaving or reducing their hours of clinical practice. In the 2021 veterinary workforce survey, 60% of veterinary vacancies were related to a veterinarian vacating a role and 40% were newly created roles.⁵

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

Australian studies indicate an approximate attrition rate of 23% from veterinary clinical practice, prior to retirement. This is understood to relate to a range of factors including:⁶

- A lack of opportunity for career development and professional advancement,
- Dissatisfaction with remuneration,
- Excessive work hours and workload, and
- On call duties.

Additionally, approximately 20 – 30% of veterinarians are engaged in less than full time hours, predominately due to:⁵

- Personal preference,
- Semi-retirement,
- Parental responsibilities, and
- Maintaining acceptable standards of mental health.

¹ <https://www.bordermail.com.au/story/8160995/no-quick-fix-for-staffing-shortages-hindering-border-vet-clinics/>. Accessed 16/7/2023.

² Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report.

³ Australian Veterinary Association (2019): Australian Veterinary Workforce Survey 2018.

⁴ Animal Medicines Australia (2022) Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people AMAU008-Pet-Ownership22-Report_v1.6_WEB.pdf (animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au)

⁵ Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report.

⁶ Montoya, A. A, Hazel, S. J, Hebart, M. L, McArthur, M. L (2021) Risk factors associated with veterinary attrition from clinical practice: a descriptive study. Australian Veterinary Journal 99, 11: 495-501.

Consequently, recruitment competition is high, and the attraction and retention of experienced veterinarians is particularly difficult. RSPCA NSW has witnessed a shift in its veterinary workforce, over several years, towards a less experienced team. Currently, of 48 veterinarians, the median time since graduation is 5.5 years. Twelve of the RSPCA NSW veterinarians have over 10 years of experience, but only one of those veterinarians is employed in a full-time capacity. This demonstrates one of the challenges of creating a sustainable workforce. To succeed, develop and avoid overwhelm, junior veterinarians require the support and tutelage of experienced veterinarians (who practice contemporary standards of veterinary medicine), yet these individuals are in high demand.

Due to the number of veterinarians working part time, it is necessary for each practice to attract and retain a greater number of individual veterinarians to deliver the necessary output. Fewer than 40% of RSPCA NSW veterinarians work for RSPCA full time which has required the organisation to employ 40% more individual vets to achieve the necessary full-time equivalency.

As competition for the recruitment of vets intensifies, veterinary remuneration has increased along with efforts to offer attractive working conditions. This is undoubtedly a good and necessary change for veterinarians and may positively influence industry retention. However, not all veterinary practices are able to compete equally due to geographical and business specific factors. For veterinary practices with a requirement to deliver after hours services, few opportunities for referral of excessive caseload, and a higher proportion of cost constrained clients (frustrating efforts to drive the revenue sufficient for highly competitive salaries), the challenge of attracting and retaining vets is significant. This can become a vicious cycle for these practices, with an inability to recruit, workloads remain high and after-hours shifts are frequent for their employed veterinarians increasing the likelihood that they will, in turn, leave for more appealing opportunities. This scenario is particularly relevant in regional and rural veterinary businesses. RSPCA NSW Broken Hill Veterinary Clinic has had to address each of these challenges, to remain viable, with vacancies repeatedly taking over 12 months to fill.

Responses to internal RSPCA NSW veterinary engagement questionnaires echo the results of industry wide surveys when exploring reasons why veterinarians would consider leaving their role. Responses refer to a combination of factors challenging job satisfaction:

- Remuneration dissatisfaction,
- High workload and
- Emotional stress

A remuneration increase for veterinarians and nurses in the last two years has been associated with improved attraction and retention of veterinary staff. In conjunction with improved staffing rates, the organisation has also seen a significant decrease in reported rates of concern about workload. Despite RSPCA NSW veterinary salary averages now aligning with reported average Australian veterinary industry pay rates,⁷ remuneration remains the highest rated concern for our veterinarians

⁷ Australian Veterinary Association (2021) Workforce Survey Salary Integration.
<https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-remuneration-analysis-final-to-print.pdf>

in internal surveys. Similarly, the Australian veterinary workforce survey conducted in 2021 indicates that approximately 63% of both clinically and non-clinically employed veterinarians are satisfied with their remuneration.⁸ If this leads to veterinarians exiting the industry, it presents a significant issue for maintaining a sustainable workforce as there are ultimately limits to what the majority of the animal owning public is willing and able to spend on their pets' health care (to fund higher veterinary salaries). In addition, there is a scarcity of low or no cost options available to safeguard the welfare of animals owned by cost constrained clients. While this may not be a problem that small businesses (veterinary clinics) are responsible for solving, it will continue to impact veterinarians and it does present a very real problem to communities as people's health and wellbeing is inextricably linked with that of our animals.

Of 3,139 veterinarians responding to a 2021 veterinary workforce survey, 13.4% reported that they were intending to leave the profession or were unsure whether they would still be working in the profession. The most common reason given for this was "disillusionment with the profession."⁸ While this is a non-specific response it can be assumed that this is, in part, related to the long hours of work that some veterinarians are enduring. Over forty-five per cent of veterinarians working in a practice setting reported working in excess of 40 hours per week.⁸ Considering the physically, emotionally and intellectually taxing nature of the work it is not surprising that research has identified that longer working hours are associated with increased anxiety and depression in some veterinarians.⁹ This presents a very significant limitation to retaining veterinarians within the workforce as extreme workloads and long hours cannot easily be addressed, particularly in circumstances where:

- Veterinary practices are in locations where there are limited options for referral to other practices or emergency or specialist clinics,
- There is a moral, statutory, and professional responsibility to consider the welfare of animals presented to you,
- There is a functional shortage of veterinarians to meet demand for services and a particular shortage of experienced veterinarians.

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

Veterinarians describe higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress and burnout than the general population.¹⁰ This is a growing area of research internationally. Studies have identified a range of factors associated with burnout that relate to professional environment, personal circumstances, and personality.¹¹

Studies report female veterinarians tend to have poorer mental health than male veterinarians and members of the LGBTQI+ population have been identified as having a higher likelihood of poorer

⁸ Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report.

⁹ Pohl, R., Botscharow, J., Böckelmann, I. et al. Stress and strain among veterinarians: a scoping review. *Ir Vet J* 75, 15 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13620-022-00220-x>

¹⁰ Hatch PH, Winefield HR, Christie BA, Lievaart JJ. Workplace stress, mental health, and burnout of veterinarians in Australia. *Aust Vet J.* (2011) Nov;89(11):460-8. doi: 10.1111/j.1751-0813.2011.00833.x. PMID: 22008127.

¹¹ Pohl, R., Botscharow, J., Böckelmann, I. et al. Stress and strain among veterinarians: a scoping review. *Ir Vet J* 75, 15 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13620-022-00220-x>

mental health outcomes than the general veterinary population. Another study identified a statistically significant association between psychological distress and marital status with partnered veterinarians having lower psychological distress scores.¹²

Certain personality traits have also been identified as relevant to psychological load for veterinarians. People with high resilience show fewer burnout symptoms and fewer consequences of mental illness. A study involving over 500 Australian veterinarians identified perfectionism as a trait that enhances vulnerability to the risk of greater distress in response to morally challenging events in veterinary practice.¹³

Several aspects of veterinary practice have been identified as risk factors for psychological strain and burn-out. The impact of medical errors on veterinarians can be significant with one study reporting that over 30% of those having been involved in errors experienced feelings of reduced job satisfaction, burnout, persistent guilt, overall reduced happiness and problems sleeping.¹⁴ Client complaints also impact negatively on veterinary job satisfaction and mental health.¹⁵ An exceedingly common client complaint relates to the cost of the care estimate or incurred by client. Attempts to shame, guilt or bully veterinarians into reducing the cost of treatment are stressful and upsetting interactions for veterinary staff. In addition, adversarial and abusive client behaviour directed towards veterinary staff has been reported and can reasonably be expected to impact the psychological wellbeing of those involved. This is particularly the case where conflict arises when veterinarians are making decisions to protect their own health, such as the refusal to attend unwell horses that have not been vaccinated for the deadly zoonotic infection, Hendra virus.

Working hours are identified as one of the main stress factors in veterinary practice. Authors of an Australian study on attrition from clinical practice highlight the impact, not only of long hours, but particularly on-call duties. Their study showed that the risk of veterinarians leaving clinical practice increased by 1.89 for every unit increase in the square root of hours worked. Having on-call duties increased the odds of attrition by 10 times.¹⁶ The 2021 Australian veterinary workplace survey indicates a high prevalence of long working hours, failure to leave work on time and a desire for manageable workload and greater work-life balance.¹⁷

Potential moral stressors in the veterinary profession include suspicion of patient/animal abuse, clients unable to pay for recommended treatment and performing euthanasia. A North American study of veterinarians found that over 70% of respondents felt that the obstacles they faced that

¹² Pohl, R., Botscharow, J., Böckelmann, I. et al. Stress and strain among veterinarians: a scoping review. *Ir Vet J* 75, 15 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13620-022-00220-x>

¹³ Crane MF, Phillips JK, Karin E. Trait perfectionism strengthens the negative effects of moral stressors occurring in veterinary practice. *Aust Vet J.* (2015) Oct;93(10):354-60. doi: 10.1111/avj.12366. PMID: 26412116.

¹⁴ Kogan LR, Rishniw M, Hellyer PW, Schoenfeld-Tacher RM. Veterinarians' experiences with near misses and adverse events. (2018) *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 252(5):586–95.

¹⁵ Rogers CW, Murphy LA, Murphy RA, Malouf KA, Natsume RE, Ward BD, Tansey C, Nakamura RK. An analysis of client complaints and their effects on veterinary support staff. *Vet Med Sci.* 2022 Mar;8(2):925-934. doi: 10.1002/vms3.725. Epub 2022 Jan 19. PMID: 35044103; PMCID: PMC8959328.

¹⁶ Montoya, A. A, Hazel, S. J, Hebart, M. L, McArthur, M. L (2021) Risk factors associated with veterinary attrition from clinical practice: a descriptive study. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 99, 11: 495-501.

¹⁷ Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report.

prevented them from providing appropriate care caused them or their staff moderate to severe distress.¹⁸ Ethical conflict and resulting moral distress is likely to be an important source of poor well-being and burn-out within the veterinary profession.¹⁹ In these emotionally charged situations, veterinarians become “accidental counsellors” for which very few are likely to be sufficiently trained and equipped.

RSPCA NSW veterinarians are witness to higher rates of animal cruelty and neglect than many veterinarians and might also suspect or be aware of human welfare issues such as domestic violence, homelessness and elder abuse, and significant mental health disorders such as those suffering from animal hoarding disorders. In addition, shelter animal care carries the responsibility of decision making for individual animals in circumstances that can be difficult and emotionally charged. There is an inherent pressure in assessing current and predicted future welfare for thousands of animals, predicting the safety of the adopting public and selecting appropriate treatment to ameliorate suffering, which may include euthanasia. When there are vocal criticisms of RSPCA’s decision making in this regard it impacts the morale of the veterinary teams. Approximately 48% of RSPCA NSW veterinarians report feeling a degree of emotional stress in their role but with high rates of job satisfaction reported, it appears there are other factors at play in preventing burnout.

Veterinarians at the Sydney and Rutherford veterinary hospitals, while having a heavy case load, are able to avoid frequently working additional hours and do not do on call work. This seems to have a protective effect on their wellbeing and overall job satisfaction. By comparison, the RSPCA Broken Hill veterinarians do not undertake shelter work but have had the greatest challenges in ensuring wellbeing due to being one of only two veterinary practices in the local government area, there is a requirement to offer the community an after-hours service alongside the significant struggle attracting and retaining veterinarians to this rural practice.

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

Veterinary nurses play a critical role in veterinary teams. The efficiency and effectiveness of veterinary service delivery depends on having enough skilled and experienced nurses employed in a practice. A frequent factor negatively impacting veterinarian job satisfaction is insufficient nursing support. The proper training and utilisation of veterinary nurses can also have a significant impact on practice profitability as using these team members to their potential, in turn, allows veterinarians to achieve their maximum efficiency. A potential barrier to the promotion and recognition of veterinary nurse qualifications is the absence of a nursing regulatory framework in Australia. This is a concept that has been supported by the Australian Veterinary Boards Council.²⁰

¹⁸ Moses L, Malowney MJ, Wesley Boyd J. Ethical conflict and moral distress in veterinary practice: A survey of North American veterinarians. *J Vet Intern Med.* 2018 Nov;32(6):2115-2122. doi: 10.1111/jvim.15315. Epub 2018 Oct 15. PMID: 30320478; PMCID: PMC6271308.

¹⁹ Arbe Montoya AI, Hazel S, Matthew SM, McArthur ML. Moral distress in veterinarians. *Vet Rec.* 2019 Nov 23;185(20):631. doi: 10.1136/vr.105289. Epub 2019 Aug 19. PMID: 31427407

²⁰ <https://avbc.asn.au/news/avbc-council-agrees-to-move-towards-regulation-of-veterinary-nurses-in-consultation-with-the-avnat-registration-scheme/> Accessed 20/7/2023.

The challenges affecting veterinary nurses have, unfortunately, not had the degree of research and attention as those impacting veterinarians. However, it is reasonable to consider that many of the challenges would be common to both sets of employees working in the same environment and include uncompetitive pay, emotional stressors and high workload. RSPCA NSW internal workplace questionnaires reflect these issues as being of highest concern among nursing staff. There are certainly the same recruitment challenges being experienced by veterinary practices when seeking to fill nursing positions with experienced veterinary nurses most difficult to attract.

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

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

In Sydney, the role of after-hours service provision has largely been delegated to dedicated emergency veterinary hospitals which are often associated with specialist veterinary practices. There are distinct benefits to this model as emergency veterinarians will often be particularly experienced or additionally qualified in emergency and critical care medicine and will have access to facilities that best support emergency presentations. In addition, this removes the demand on veterinarians to perform both a general practice business hours service and an after-hours service, better facilitating reasonable working hours for both teams of veterinarians. It also provides a viable opportunity for general practice veterinarians to fulfill their statutory responsibility to offer referral in the case of hospitalised animals that would benefit from overnight monitoring. However, the delivery of well equipped, adequately staffed after hours services is extremely expensive. Consequently, the cost to clients is necessarily high and financially out of reach for many animal owners leading to ethical conflicts for veterinarians, distress and helplessness for animal owners and welfare risks for animals.

Outside of Sydney, and some large regional centres, dedicated emergency veterinary services do not exist. The population sizes and client demographics do not permit the set up and operation of emergency services to be financially viable. Therefore, in regional areas of NSW, out of hours veterinary care is provided by the veterinarians in the local practice usually by taking calls and undertaking consultations alone, without the presence or support of another staff member, unless this is considered essential for the treatment of the animal. The impact of this on veterinarians can be very significant and include anxiety and safety risks associated with meeting clients alone after hours, fatigue from the additional hours and the lack of a psychological break from work during overnight and weekend shifts. Performing on call duties increases the rate at which veterinarians leave clinical practice by a factor of 10.²¹ Two-thirds of veterinarians who perform after hours duties would prefer to do less or none at all and 19% of respondents to a veterinary workplace survey would be more likely to consider working in rural practice if after hours duties were minimal.²² Without doubt, after hours work presents a barrier to retaining and attracting veterinarians to regional veterinary practice and it presents a significant risk to the wellbeing of those who undertake the work.

²¹ Montoya, A. A, Hazel, S. J, Hebart, M. L, McArthur, M. L (2021) Risk factors associated with veterinary attrition from clinical practice: a descriptive study. Australian Veterinary Journal 99, 11: 495-501.

²² Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report.

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

There are a range of legislative instruments that regulate veterinarians and veterinary practice in NSW. The *NSW Veterinary Practices Act 2003* has the necessary purpose of regulating the profession to ensure acceptable standards, protect animal welfare, consumers, and the public interest. The Act seeks to achieve this by defining standards of veterinary conduct, detailing hospital licensing procedures, complaints processes and procedures that can only be undertaken by veterinarians.

A survey of veterinarians determined that approximately 84% of respondents were not dissatisfied with the regulatory body in NSW which might be interpreted as the legislative framework having little adverse impact on most veterinarians.² Montaya et al found no significant association between being investigated by a regulatory body and leaving clinical practice.²³ Notwithstanding this, the experience of being subject to an investigation by the veterinary regulator has been a source of significant anxiety to veterinarians and, while a complaints and investigation mechanism is important for safeguarding the profession's reputation, ensuring the process is as fair and efficient as possible is crucial to reducing the impacts.

In the course of their practice, veterinarians are regulated by, amongst other laws:

- the *NSW Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Act 1966 and regulations*
- the *NSW Radiation Control Act 1990*
- the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 and regulations*,
- the *Stock Medicines Act 1998*,
- the *Biosecurity Act 2015 and regulations*,
- the *Animal Research Act 1985 and regulations*,
- The *NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 and regulations* also have indirect impacts on veterinary practices.

This is a complex regulatory environment which exposes individuals in the profession to inadvertent non-compliance. The focus of veterinarians throughout education and career is, necessarily, on veterinary science. If there is insufficient awareness of the laws then there is an increased risk of work health and safety, human wellbeing, and animal welfare impacts. By way of example, veterinarians have reported psychological distress arising from clients refusing to undertake necessary veterinary treatment for their animals.²⁴ However, the moral stress experienced by vets in this circumstance may be lessened if they feel empowered to address this situation. The *NSW Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* (NSW) makes a failure to provide necessary veterinary treatment an offence and gives certain powers to veterinarians. While RSPCA NSW does receive several cruelty reports from veterinarians each year, it is not evident that all veterinarians have had the opportunity to become entirely clear on the laws that govern and support their work.

(h) the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in

²³ Montoya, A. A, Hazel, S. J, Hebart, M. L, McArthur, M. L (2021) Risk factors associated with veterinary attrition from clinical practice: a descriptive study. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 99, 11: 495-501.

²⁴ SBS Insight (2020) Veterinary Care. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdUBcDRBTdM>

regional, rural and remote New South Wales

Veterinarians are currently in high demand, with many roles currently advertised, and some offering very attractive remuneration packages. The evidence is that vets are seeking higher pay rates in jobs that offer a reduced workload, no on-call and a work life balance.²⁵ Furthermore, we know that vets the ethical dilemmas faced when seeking solutions for cost constrained clients can cause considerable distress.²⁶

Regional and rural practices in NSW can have the greatest challenges providing the most appealing working environments with a requirement to service the community after hours, limited opportunities to refer excessive or complex cases and a diverse clientele which includes socioeconomically disadvantaged animal owners. Veterinarians report that they might consider working in rural practice for an improved lifestyle if there are minimal on call duties and good work hours. However, these conditions are very difficult to satisfy and a failure to attract or retain vets perpetuates the difficulties with a higher case load, longer working hours and more on call demands per vet.²⁷

Communities in NSW require veterinarians willing and able to treat livestock, horses and small animals. However, the number of veterinary graduates choosing to work and remain in large animal practice is proportionately very low.²⁸ The result of this shortage is closure of veterinary clinics in country NSW and the remaining practices stretched even further to service the underserved communities.²⁹

Regional veterinary practices are not only supported by fewer veterinary services (emergency and specialist hospitals) but may also have no local animal welfare organisations and under resourced council pounds and wildlife rescue organisations so that the burden of additional animal care work related to stray and unwanted pets and injured wildlife is not able to be shared. There are other services that are limited in regional NSW that may hinder the ability and desire of veterinarians to work in the regions. Almost one third of veterinarians who work part time do so to accommodate parental responsibilities and others report leaving the profession because of an inability to find roles that accommodate their care responsibilities.³⁰ In many parts of Australia, but particularly rural areas, there are regions where care for young children is either inaccessible or expensive. This can be the deciding factor for some on whether they live in these areas.³¹

²⁵ Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report.

²⁶ Moses L, Malowney MJ, Wesley Boyd J. Ethical conflict and moral distress in veterinary practice: A survey of North American veterinarians. *J Vet Intern Med.* 2018 Nov;32(6):2115-2122. doi: 10.1111/jvim.15315. Epub 2018 Oct 15. PMID: 30320478; PMCID: PMC6271308.

²⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-15/western-nsw-vet-shortage-high-workloads-few-graduates/102593084>

²⁸ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/male-vets-are-a-dying-breed-and-it-s-not-helping-a-critical-shortage-20221124-p5c14o.html>

²⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2023-03-03/vet-shortage-nsw-pets-livestock-farm-call-outs/102045538>

³⁰ Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report.

³¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-29/childcare-shortage-wangaratta-regional-australia-family-growth/101528242>

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

In NSW, legal ambiguity exists regarding who is responsible for certain populations of animals. Stray and unwanted cats exist in extreme numbers³² and Part 4 of the *Companion Act 1998* (NSW) is sufficiently ambiguous to permit Council interpretation which avoids accepting responsibility for their intake. Notwithstanding this, it is difficult to understand how any single agency can cope with the numbers of cats needing refuge each year with RSPCA NSW alone accepting approximately 15,000 cats into shelters and veterinary hospitals annually. Consequently, as animal advocates and carers with responsibilities for considering animal welfare, veterinarians become implicated in providing care for stray animals.

In NSW, animal control is the responsibility of local councils, which includes the provision of facilities to receive stray and surrendered companion animals. Section 83E *Companion Animals Act 1998* (NSW) gives veterinarians and their staff access to the Companion Animal Register for the purposes of locating the owner of a companion animal in their custody. As a result, at times, vets are requested to search the register when members of the public find a lost dog or cat. However, for many practices, this has evolved to result in a significant resource burden and competes with their core function of providing veterinary care. This is the case when stray animal presentations occur frequently, local council pound facilities are not open to receive a stray animal, there is an expectation or insistence by the finder of the animal that the animal will remain in the care of the veterinary practice, councils do not provide for the transport of animals being transferred from vets to council facilities, councils refuse to accept certain animals (commonly cats due to an interpretation of Part 4 of the Act) and when council facilities are at capacity.

Where a stray animal is injured or sick this presents additional complications for veterinarians. The *NSW Veterinary Practices Act 2003* (NSW), associated regulation and code of conduct requires veterinarians to always consider the welfare of animals and to provide pain relief, first aid, euthanasia, or referral to an animal in their presence. Therefore, when presented with an injured stray animal, providing some form of treatment is necessary and appropriate. However, if the council responsible for that animal does not engage with veterinarians in respect of the animal, then all necessary steps to notify an owner of the animal's whereabouts are not taken, veterinarians are left with ambiguity on how to proceed with the animal and incur substantial expense managing their care.

RSPCA NSW Sydney vet hospital and shelter receive over 5,000 stray animals each year. Section 62 *Companion Animals Act 1986* (NSW) directs people to deliver stray animals to councils or approved premises. RSPCA NSW is an approved premises. However, it is also a requirement of the Act that an approved premises causes that animal to be delivered to a council pound if it has not been reclaimed within 72 hours. Efforts to comply with this law are frustrated when councils refuse the acceptance of these animals.

³² <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/news-and-media/latest-news/the-mathematics-of-cats>

Veterinarians are not infrequently the recipient of surrendered animals where an owner no longer wants, or cannot afford to keep, a companion animal. There is a greater pressure on regional practices located in areas without animal welfare or rescue organisations capable of assisting. Veterinarians are not able to successfully run their businesses and focus on providing their services if frequently burdened with homeless animals, some of whom they have provided surgical or medical treatment. To avoid this, options exist to refuse the acceptance of an unwanted animal or to euthanise the animal. However, the psychological toll of destroying healthy or treatable animals, and the ethical conflict it causes, should not be underestimated,³³

Wildlife presents a similar challenge as veterinarians and licensed wildlife carers are the only individuals legally permitted to have native animals in their care and the wildlife rehabilitation sector is almost entirely dependent on charity and volunteer organisations. Evidence suggests that the impact on veterinary resources is considerable, and many vets are undertaking this work at their own cost. A 2020 survey of veterinarians, about their interactions with wildlife, determined that the annual value of free services and products was estimated to be \$1,038,650. Reported average weekly animal caseload was about five with birds the most frequent patients. Cost of services was the main challenge faced by practices, followed by knowledge and skill of staff.³⁴

Veterinarians have also taken responsibility for caring for wildlife, livestock and companion animals in response to bushfires and floods. The emergency response activities sit primarily with the NSW Government Agriculture and Animal Services Functional Area (AASFA). However, the departmental and Local Land Services veterinarians do not provide veterinary treatment for animals and so private practitioners and animal welfare veterinarians have been essential for providing treatment to injured and diseased animals and engaging in recovery efforts in those communities. This demand exists in circumstances where the veterinarians in those communities may have experienced quite significant personal losses during the disaster.

Emergency animal disease outbreaks also depend heavily on veterinarians to implement surveillance and control measures. For example, hundreds of private practice veterinarians were engaged heavily in the successful eradication of equine influenza in NSW in 2008.³⁵ A very real risk associated with veterinary workforce shortages, particularly with large animal veterinarians, is that there will be insufficient human resources to respond effectively to the next emergency disease outbreaks which could include devastating diseases such as foot and mouth disease or African swine fever.

(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

³³ Moses L, Malowney MJ, Wesley Boyd J. Ethical conflict and moral distress in veterinary practice: A survey of North American veterinarians. *J Vet Intern Med.* 2018 Nov;32(6):2115-2122. doi: 10.1111/jvim.15315. Epub 2018 Oct 15. PMID: 30320478; PMCID: PMC6271308

³⁴ Ron Haering, Vanessa Wilson, Annie Zhuo, Peter Stathis; A survey of veterinary professionals about their interactions with free-living native animals and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in New South Wales, Australia. *Australian Zoologist* 9 April 2021; 41 (2): 254–282. doi: <https://doi.org/10.7882/AZ.2020.045>

³⁵ <https://www.vetvoice.com.au/articles/ten-years-from-the-start-of-the-equine-influenza-outbreak/>

As access to veterinary care has become limited by physical or financial accessibility animal welfare has suffered.

Animals in council pounds provide a tangible example of the welfare impacts of the difficulties in accessing timely veterinary care. Capacity pressures on council impound facilities, and animal welfare and rescue organisations, are at their peak due to several factors. Companion animal population management strategies in NSW have failed to bring the numbers of unwanted dogs and cats to a manageable level.³⁶ Animal adoptions have plummeted with a reduction in demand for dogs and cats after the COVID-19 adoption boom coupled with a rise in pure bred and designer dog breeding to capitalise on the previously lucrative market, and the increased cost of living and accommodation restrictions making pet ownership unachievable. Additionally, the *Companion Animals Amendment (Rehoming Animals)* to the *Companion Animals Act 1986* (NSW) requires an increased length of stay in all cats and dogs in council pounds, including those that are feral or infant, except for those determined by a veterinarian to be cruel to keep alive due to injury or illness.

With such extraordinary pressures on capacity, one of the few levers available to these agencies is the prompt assessment and processing of animals by veterinarians to determine outcomes. This requires veterinarians to desex animals for rehoming or the assessment of animals as requiring euthanasia to prevent suffering. RSPCA NSW is aware of several councils who have not been able to find veterinarians with the capacity to service their needs in a timely manner. When sheltering facilities, including pounds, house more animals than they have the capacity to care for, welfare is compromised. Increased length of stay in sheltering facilities is associated with an increased risk of illness, behavioural decline and euthanasia.³⁷ Lack of ready access to veterinarians has also been implicated in sub optimal euthanasia processes for pound animals. Euthanasia guidelines provide that there are animal welfare benefits to sedating animals prior to euthanasia.³⁸ The prescribing and administration of these medications requires veterinary involvement.

A reduction in the capacity of veterinarians to respond to the demand for animal neutering procedures also has significant animal welfare implications. Large populations of stray and roaming cats and dogs are themselves at risk of poor welfare as well as impacting the welfare of wildlife, other companion animals and humans.³⁹ Sustained, targeted neutering programs have demonstrated a positive effect on stray and unwanted feline populations.⁴⁰ RSPCA NSW, in partnership with various NSW local councils, has been facilitating the neutering programs around the state. However these efforts have been severely hampered by insufficient veterinary access to undertake the neutering procedures. Many veterinary clinics in metropolitan areas have been too busy to accommodate the

³⁶ The Centre of International Economics (2022) Rehoming Companion Animals in NSW Report. https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CIE-Draft-Report_NSW-OLG_Rehoming-of-Companion-Animals-in-NSW.pdf

³⁷ Mozes R, Pearl DL, Niel L, Weese JS. Epidemiological investigation of euthanasia in an Ontario animal shelter. *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*. 2018;20(6):479-486. doi:10.1177/1098612X17715152

³⁸ <https://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Guidelines-on-Euthanasia-2020.pdf>

³⁹ Dale A, The comparative welfare status of owned, managed stray and unmanaged strays cats. 6th National Getting to Zero Summit and Workshops, Gold Coast 2015

⁴⁰ Scarlett, J.; Johnston, N. Impact of a subsidized spay neuter clinic on impoundments and euthanasia in a community shelter and on service and complaint calls to animal control. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 2012, 15, 53-69

additional work and, in rural areas, there are often no, or infrequently present, vets such as in Walgett and Weddin Shires where a veterinarian visits once a week but has had to be absent due to parental leave. It becomes difficult to see how important animal welfare initiatives can progress when there is insufficient veterinary capacity to support them.

The veterinary shortage has magnified barriers to accessing veterinary care with an inequitable impact on animal owners in regional or remote NSW and those constrained by financial limitations.

(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 most comprehensive assessment of barriers to accessing vet care was published in 2018 by the Access to Vet Care Coalition.⁴¹ Although the study was undertaken by the University of Tennessee on an American pet owning population, the findings are directly applicable to the Australian context. Overwhelmingly, the greatest reason pet owners gave for their pet not receiving the desired treatment was that they could not afford it. This was the reason given in 80% of responses. Other reasons given in 4% - 15% of responses included no access to transport, uncertainty about where to go and concern about what the provider would think of them, no leash or carrier and language barriers.

The nature of these responses shows the current inequity that exists in accessing pet health care with the most vulnerable in our society severely disadvantaged. Antiquated attitudes that dictate that these issues should be avoided by limiting pet ownership to those with sufficient means has not served society well. There are currently vast numbers of companion animals in need of care giving and ownership and the present societal attitudes and legislative provisions set expectations that animals will be provided homes.⁴² Confining animal ownership to a small proportion of financially privileged members of society conflicts with our desire to provide maximum opportunity for animals to experience loving homes.

In recent times a series of factors have culminated to exacerbate these access barriers. The cost of veterinary services has increased significantly, at least in part, to support the necessary uplift in veterinary remuneration and to respond to increased cost of business delivery. Simultaneously with the rising cost of living and financial pressures there have been deepening levels of poverty with more than 1 million people in NSW living in poverty.⁴³

For financially constrained animal owners living in remote areas of the country accessing veterinary care becomes virtually impossible. Since 2017, RSPCA NSW has conducted outreach Indigenous Community Companion Animal Health programs travelling to remote locations including Bourke,

⁴¹ Daugherty L (2018) Access to Vet Care Coalition. Access to Veterinary Care Barriers, Current Practices, and Public Policy. <https://pphe.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/avcc-report.pdf>

⁴² The Centre of International Economics (2022) Rehoming Companion Animals in NSW Report. https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CIE-Draft-Report_NSW-OLG_Rehoming-of-Companion-Animals-in-NSW.pdf

⁴³ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/26/latte-line-poverty-rates-worsen-in-parts-of-sydney-creating-a-30-gap-between-some-suburbs#:~:text=The%20state%2Dwide%20poverty%20rate,rates%20between%202016%20and%202021.>

Brewarrina, Collarenebri, Walgett and Wilcannia. These communities are at least 100km from veterinary services and rely entirely on subsidised veterinary care to be delivered to their region. Without this care, the animals in the community will suffer health compromise but the risk to human health is also significant through, for example, the risk of exposure to parasite mediated diseases.

RSPCA veterinarians and veterinary nurses spend approximately 30 days each year providing animal health care advice and preventative health care to animals owned by clients in underserved regions, including parts of Sydney. In financial year 2023 these outreach activities supported 2,959 animals, belonging to 2,206 people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage to attain core preventive veterinary services. These programs are successfully delivered within the current veterinary practices regulatory framework that has not presented any barrier to these outreach services.

The one welfare concept recognises that the health and wellbeing of people is connected to the health of animals and the environment. Barriers to accessing vet care disproportionately impact vulnerable members of our community further risking their physical and mental health and threatening the welfare of their animals.

Members of our community experiencing homelessness, and elderly animal owners, are disproportionately impacted by barriers to accessing veterinary care due to financial constraints and mobility and transport limitations, as well as the potential to be suffering from physical and mental health challenges. RSPCA NSW programs which support these animal care givers are in great demand. In financial year 20/21, 292 clients accessed the RSPCA aged care program with 286 animals provided with subsidised veterinary care to a value of \$85,857. In the same period, 259 clients were assisted through the RSPCA NSW homelessness program with veterinary treatment facilitated for 296 of these animals, worth \$71,291 in total. To increase the affordability of veterinary care to these, and other cost constrained pet owners, RSPCA veterinary hospitals have offered a 35% discount on veterinary bills to Centrelink card holders at an annual cost of \$172,000 dollars. An additional \$50,000 was spent throughout the year paying for the emergency treatment of animals owned by eligible clients at the RSPCA veterinary clinics.

However, requests for assistance with veterinary costs occur outside the RSPCA NSW veterinary network and with a demand that has been impossible to meet. Seven hundred enquiries for assistance were received from around NSW in a one-year period. Over \$100,000 was spent assisting 144 clients with the cost of providing veterinary care to 150 animals at private veterinary clinics around NSW.

(I) 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

Evidence suggests that disillusionment among veterinary teams is rooted in a perception of inadequate remuneration and excessive workload and hours.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report.

There has been a partial redress of the issue of remuneration by a move by veterinarians to charge more for their services to provide greater compensation to employees. Recent veterinary workforce surveys indicate that less than 20% of respondents reported being unsatisfied with their remuneration, although increased pay remains a driving motivation for considering leaving a role.⁴³

The perception of under payment will be exacerbated when veterinarians work excessive hours, particularly if the additional hours are unpaid or inadequately remunerated. With forty-six per cent of veterinarians, in one Australian survey, reporting that they worked over 41 hours each week and almost half of veterinarians indicating that they were not being fully compensated for additional hours worked,⁴³ it is expected that vets will feel inadequately remunerated. As there are limits to the revenue practices can generate, particularly in certain demographic and geographical areas, focusing efforts on methods to prevent excessive working hours seems to be the most logical approach to addressing disappointment with remuneration, burn-out, disillusionment and industry attrition.

Performance of after-hours duties has been identified as one of the most significant contributors to industry attrition.⁴⁵ These duties predominantly impact regional and rural veterinarians and present a barrier for ever reversing the shortage in these areas as it hampers recruitment and magnifies attrition. In metropolitan areas, dedicated emergency and after-hours facilities go some way to addressing the impact on veterinarians by segregating the responsibilities for 24 hour access to vet care into two teams. If present in regional NSW, it may not be possible for these facilities to accommodate large and small animal after hours calls but they would provide a well-supported, safer environment for surrounding veterinary practices to direct out of hours calls for triage and small animal emergencies giving vets in these areas the ability to finish their day on time, more reliably plan their family care duties and take a mental break from the demands of practice. As these facilities may be financially unviable in regional NSW, this should be a focus area for any government support or grants. Veterinarians have indicated that limiting on call duties would be required for them to consider a move to regional practice and so this seems a critical step in addressing the shortage in these areas.⁴⁵

Ethical dilemmas, such as an inability to deliver the necessary care to animals for financial reasons, contributes to burn-out and psychological stress in veterinarians.⁴⁶ Providing referral pathways for these clients to subsidised veterinary services would provide veterinarians with a way to mitigate their moral stress. Access to vet care programs, run by RSPCA NSW, have been incredibly beneficial for preventing relinquishment of pets, improving psychological wellbeing of owners and safeguarding animal welfare. However, there are large demands on these services around the whole of NSW, that out strip the capacity of a small number of not-for-profit organisations to meet. This requires investment in the design of a program of access to vet care initiatives. Where veterinarians are empowered to assist cost constrained clients this can be a source of great job satisfaction with 83% of RSPCA veterinarians citing this aspect of their job as one they enjoy the most.

⁴⁵ Montoya, A. A, Hazel, S. J, Hebart, M. L, McArthur, M. L (2021) Risk factors associated with veterinary attrition from clinical practice: a descriptive study. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 99, 11: 495-501.

⁴⁶ Moses L, Malowney MJ, Wesley Boyd J. Ethical conflict and moral distress in veterinary practice: A survey of North American veterinarians. *J Vet Intern Med.* 2018 Nov;32(6):2115-2122. doi: 10.1111/jvim.15315. Epub 2018 Oct 15. PMID: 30320478; PMCID: PMC6271308.

To reduce the burden of an already over stretched profession, clarity is required as to who is responsible for the cost and delivery of care and housing of 'unowned' animals, both domesticated and wild. This should begin with a review of the *NSW Companion Animals Act 1998* (NSW) which is no longer fit for purpose, conflicts with other NSW laws and provides ambiguity on how the welfare of companion animals can best be protected in a sustainable way. The review of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* (NSW) must also be expedited if we are to provide a co-ordinated approach to responding to the challenge of caring for these large populations of homeless animals. A requirement at s31A of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* (NSW) for RSPCA to hold a stray or abandoned animal for 21 days before it can be rehomed is bad for animal welfare, unnecessary, and in conflict with pound holding periods. Policies such as this exacerbate shelter capacity issues which has a knock-on effect to veterinarians seeking to transfer stray or surrendered animals.

As the functional shortage of veterinarians has worsened in recent times, despite the number of veterinary graduates in Australia growing, efforts to focus on veterinary workforce retention rather than increasing university positions seems advisable. However, better clarity could be provided on what the optimum number of graduating veterinarians is considering today's context since previous modelling predicted a veterinary graduate oversupply. Nevertheless, sustaining the veterinary schools and ensuring a high quality of veterinary education is important for the ongoing maintenance of the profession and the preparedness of veterinary graduates for practice. Adequate funding of these university placements is therefore necessary. Part of preparedness for veterinary graduates is understanding the regulatory environment in which they will work to ensure their safety, the safety of the community and the welfare of the animals through compliance with the relevant laws but also by knowing what support is embedded in the regulatory framework for veterinarians in the pursuit of good animal welfare. University curricula should include sufficient attention on key laws such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, The Veterinary Practice Act and The Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Act.

Targeted incentives for new graduate placement to bolster the most impacted veterinary services should be explored. For example, where there are shortages in large animal, rural or veterinary forensic disciplines, for example, university fees could be waived for veterinarians committed to following those career paths and remaining for a sufficient tenure to address the experience gaps in the veterinary teams. Of course, improving the conditions for veterinarians in the industry remains essential to prevent any individual entering a practice position having a negative experience.

There have been a range of mental health support strategies and resources developed and proposed for veterinarians including training in resilience.⁴⁷ Interventions should consider the most vulnerable populations in our industries which appear to include females and members of the LGBTQI+ population. While these interventions are worthwhile in the face of quite profound rates of mental health compromise in the profession, ultimately, investing in the creation of healthy, safe workplaces is critical.

⁴⁷ Australian Veterinary Association (2021): Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report

Managing the emotions and mental health of clients can take a significant toll on veterinary practitioners. In the USA, efforts to support veterinarians and clients has included the creation of a discipline in veterinary social work. Veterinary social work is now an established discipline in social work which assists in the delivery of veterinary care by supporting the emotional needs of the animal owner and the veterinary team to achieve good outcomes. This model shows potential for promotion in Australia and these roles could be supported particularly in practices servicing a higher proportion of vulnerable clients.⁴⁸

(m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care

Strategies that improve access to vet care must ensure that all socioeconomic groups, people in all geographic locations and those experiencing other disadvantage have adequate opportunity to seek veterinary care and advice.

As financial reasons are the greatest barrier to accessing care, ways of funding subsidised vet care must be devised and implemented. The Access to Vet Care report⁴⁹ describes various options for funding models. RSPCA NSW has seen very positive outcomes for people and their pets during the delivery of its access to veterinary care program which was funded by charitable donation to the value of approximately \$250, 000 in a year. Clients that accessed the emergency funding for their animals in the last financial year provided the following feedback:

- 50% of respondents stated they would have to surrender their animal if they did not have access to this funding;
- 25% of respondents stated that they would have had to euthanise their pets if they did not have access to this funding;
- 100% of respondents rated both the customer service experienced and vet care provided as excellent;
- 100% of respondents felt supported by the access to vet care nurse and that they were provided with enough information to make an informed decision about their pet's treatment;
- 100% of respondents also agreed on the following statements regarding the program:-
 - Their mental health had improved;
 - They were able to access veterinary care that would have been otherwise unaffordable
 - Their pet's quality of life was improved
 - They were included in the decision making
 - Had an alternative to surrender
 - Learnt something new about caring for their pet

Accessible pet friendly transportation will also reduce barriers to attending veterinary practice. However, for those in remote regions of NSW it has proven necessary to bring veterinary services to their communities. Animal and human welfare is most successfully improved where agencies co-

⁴⁸ <https://vetsocialwork.utk.edu/>

⁴⁹ Daugherty L (2018) Access to Vet Care Coalition. Access to Veterinary Care Barriers, Current Practices, and Public Policy. <https://pphe.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/avcc-report.pdf>

operate to bring a range of human and animal services and advice to underserved communities. The partnership between RSPCA NSW and NSW Health Aboriginal Environmental Health Unit was an example of such a collaboration that, until recent cessation of funding, provided a highly effective gateway for human health services and animal care simultaneously.

Other animal owners have vulnerabilities and limitations that present difficulties in them accessing veterinary care. Those experiencing homelessness and elderly animal owners all derive great benefit from the relationships with their animals. Animal companionship is associated with positive outcomes for older people especially reduced loneliness, which in older adults is associated with negative physical and mental health outcomes including cardiovascular disease, depression and accelerated mortality. Responses from clients of the program revealed that while an incredibly important source of social support and love, companion animals can also be an important barrier to accessing health and other care. Clients reported putting their animal's needs above their own and forgoing treatment for their animal's sake. Having support with their companion animals helped remove barriers for clients to access the healthcare they needed, especially treatment requiring hospitalisation. The work of RSPCA has indicated the immense demand for these services and a need to expand them in capacity and location.^{50,51}

Increasing the intensity of companion animal population control efforts is critical for making progress on dog and cat overpopulation issues which impact vets, the community and animal welfare. Accessible spay and neutering services are required to service these programs but also to support local councils with the necessary veterinary care to move animals through to adoption as needed. RSPCA NSW has commenced planning for the development of a dedicated spay clinic for this purpose in western Sydney which will come at a significant cost to operate but is an essential step in servicing the veterinary needs of the community.

⁵⁰ <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SROI-Report-Aged-Care-digital.pdf>

⁵¹ <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SROI-Report-Homelessness-and-Emergency-Boarding-Digital.pdf>