

Submission
No 198

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

Upper House Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortage in NSW

As a licensed wildlife carer in NSW, I only found out about this Inquiry today. If this Inquiry has been publicised to all wildlife rescue organisations in NSW, I would have expected that an email would have been sent around to all members. The issue about lack of availability of veterinary care for native wildlife is a very hot topic among anyone who rehabilitates wildlife. There are not enough vets that will treat wildlife. Carers often have to spend many hours travelling to see vets that are willing and/or experienced to see them. This adds stress to both the carers and the animals in their care. As a carer for a number of years, I believe the access to wildlife vets is a problem that is escalating.

Exacerbating the problem seems to be a change in policy across WIRES that all animals must be taken to a vet within 24 hours.

When I first started doing wildlife rescue, the rhetoric was that our aim as carers should be to alleviate the workload on vets that will see wildlife because they were very busy and their time valuable. We would rescue animals and take them straight to experienced carers for assessment if possible, unless the animal was obviously seriously injured ie. blood or obvious trauma. Many injuries are not apparent at first – injured animals are very good at hiding their injuries – and often its only through careful and ongoing observation that many issues are noticed – like head tilts or strange posture. Sometimes a short vet examination can miss such injuries and we all know how time poor our vets are – hence this inquiry!

Carers across WIRES tend to specialise in just one animal – so we have possum carers, bird carers, reptile carers etc and they each would have many year's experience caring night & day for that species. I am always in awe of how much these volunteers know and how much time they spend looking after the native wildlife in their care – it's like having a newborn baby several times over. Many work closely with their local vets and have established relationships with them – mutually beneficial relationships because many vets I have spoken to admit that they don't get taught much about wildlife at vet school – something which has always surprised me considering how diverse are so many of the species in this unique country. They are so diverse that the specialism that carers gain in a species can make their understanding of 'normal behaviour' very valuable and I have been able to witness how this knowledge is often shared with vets who have the necessary qualifications to treat any animal, but who may find themselves out of their depth with wildlife and the complexity of the cases sometimes put before them. To work collaboratively in this way is in the best interest of each and every animal. It also benefits the vet who learns something new and gain confidence; it benefits the carer who is able to work in close contact with a veterinarian and learn about the different medicines or treatments they administer and it certainly benefits the wildlife. I believe this gives the very best outcomes for everyone and also helps vets to deal with the emotional strain if an animal has to be euthanised. If they can confer over their diagnosis and have someone agree that the animal may be suffering, or unable to live independently in the wild, it can help when the euthanasia decision has to be made.

However, then came the Covid pandemic followed shortly afterwards by the bushfires that devastated the landscape and killed billions of native wildlife.

During Covid, getting to see vets was much harder. Many clinics put different vets on rotations, vets may have worked 'one week on, one week off' or only worked on particular days of the week. It was also not possible to go into a clinic with an animal, they were picked up outside and taken in for examination and then collected later with instructions. Many of the relationships that had been built up with vets were under pressure and so it was that often we would just see any vet that we could, as soon as possible. Some medications were also in short supply.

Then the bushfires hit. This was catastrophic and a crisis across the country. Care facilities were lost in many regions. People across the world were horrified to think of all the wildlife that suffered and was lost and donations poured into WIRES to help alleviate that suffering to the eventual sum of \$110 million. This was donated in good faith by people across the world to directly help our Australian wildlife.

That was in late 2019/early 2020.

Since then, seeing a vet has become much harder. The pandemic meant the loss of many overseas veterinarians. Also, during the pandemic, many people stuck at home decided they wanted the companionship offered by a pet and the sale of cats and dogs, and other domestic pet species increased greatly.

I believe this uptake in pet ownership and the loss of vets from overseas has led to some of the pressure now being felt by our vets across the state but additionally, WIRES own policy and ways of operating have changed.

Carers are no longer being asked to keep wildlife out of vets – our directive is that all animals must be taken to a vet within 24 hours. This is not always easy or possible.

Carers in remote areas may have to travel great distances, at their own expense, to see a vet. Even in the city, it can be very difficult to gain access to an ‘exotic vet’ that can treat wildlife. Some clinics that used to have staff on site 24 hours, now only have specialist staff in during the day or even just on certain days of the week. For instance, the exotic vet that I used to be able to see Monday – Friday now only works Tuesdays and Fridays. So what happens when we do a rescue on a Saturday afternoon? It’s actually at weekends that many wildlife rescues come in because Members of the Public are out & about more enjoying their gardens or the countryside, and that’s when animals in distress are spotted and calls for rescues come in yet access to vets is not always possible.

With all of the monies donated to WIRES, I would say that the number one request by carers is for access to wildlife vets. Yet I do not believe WIRES has spent much of the donations helping their members to get better access to vets, or spent much of the money paying vets for their services. If possible, I would ask WIRES what percentage of the bushfire donations have been spent *directly* on animal care and treatment?

They have employed 2 WIRES vets but volunteers are not able to contact them for specific animal advice. It seems they have been employed to be experts that WIRES can call on if they want any statements for court cases or for media announcements. As far as I am aware, they are not providing direct care to any rescued animal. They are consultants.

Prior to the bushfire donations, WIRES had just the 1 rescue van which used to operate across the organisation and would assist volunteers in many ways. It would pick up animals from vets and drop to other vets or deliver animals from a vet to a carer or from one carer to another. Since receiving the donations, WIRES has purchased many more rescue vans – possibly the fleet is now 10 or 11 vans across NSW, QLD and Tasmania. But the directive from WIRES seems to now be that the van drivers (all employees) can drop off to vets only – not carers. They perform many rescues, sometimes a few in succession, and then take these animals all to one vet clinic. Is this adding to the burden for those clinics? Are they being paid by WIRES to receive more wildlife than they would have done previously? Do all these animals need to see a vet? These are questions that I believe need to be clarified.

WIRES instigated a new ‘Rescue 101 program’ back in March 2021. Members of the public complete a 4-hour course online and they can perform simple rescues. They can take an *obviously injured* animal straight to a vet only – NOT to a carer. In fact, the 101 rescuers are not allowed to have any contact with any WIRES members. Their only point of contact for advice is the WIRES Rescue Office. They are not supposed to attend rescues for baby animals or adult animals that show no obvious signs of injury.

Over the 2 years it has been implemented, many WIRES members have expressed concern over the animal welfare outcomes they are witnessing and the increased workload that has been added to the vet clinics. They are seeing more & more callsheets which mention that the animal has spent a long time in the clinic, that the vet may not have appropriate food for the animal, that the vet is closing (either overnight or for the

weekend) and the animal must be picked up or it will either be left in the clinic without supervision, or it will be euthanised. This is written on the callsheets. I do not believe this is the fault of the vets or vet staff which have a duty of care to accept wildlife, but due to the implementation of this program, and the fact that WIRES vans now only drop rescued wildlife to vets. Vet clinics could be receiving many more native animals than they would have done in previous years.

Native wildlife is treated for free by most vets in NSW. Some have started charging for medications. Some charge for their consultations now – we are seeing this more and more. Since the pandemic, we have all been made aware of the additional strain our vets are facing plus the increased cost of medications.

I would like to question the implementation of these two policies, both of which affect our vets and their workload. Most vets are unable to prioritise wildlife care because they have paying customers who must be seen first. Often wildlife is only seen at the end of the day or in gaps the vet may have between paying customers. Was the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) consulted by WIRES before either of these policy changes were implemented? If not, why not?

I believe a retainer may have been paid to a couple of particular veterinary clinics in Sydney to treat wildlife but this is not something that has been done across a wide geographical area. In fact, many carers are being told to pay for the veterinary treatment themselves and in a very recent court case against a WIRES carer, I understand that an expert for WIRES has told the carer that if she cannot afford weekly visits to the vet for the animals in her care, then she should not have become a carer in the first place. This is when WIRES still has millions of the funds donated by the general public in 2020 in their bank account. Some reimbursements are made to carers but I believe this is capped at a rather nominal sum per carer. Sometimes this reimbursement does not even cover the cost of the consultation.

Should our vets be treated as Drop-Off centres for wildlife? Or should the animals be going to experienced carers first for assessment? I believe that the experience held by many wildlife rescuers is being ignored and the value they bring to this important sector overlooked. The dependency on every animal seeing a vet is adding to the strain on vets whilst also impacting adversely on the wildlife that unfortunately often spends too much time in a stressful environment - dogs & cats barking, bright lights, lots of activity, sometimes ignored (by no fault of the veterinary staff) until they can be examined at the end of an already busy day.

Carers are also unfortunately seeing more animals deteriorate at vets because the van drivers and 101 rescuers just drop off and leave. The onus is on the local carers to collect these animals but the changing policy is eroding the carer/vet relationships that were previously established in a carers local area.

It used to be that local vets and carers working collaboratively would have great outcomes for wildlife because local vets that may not have received much training in native wildlife could learn so much from the carers they would work with for particular animals and often ongoing treatment plans would be something worked out together. This drop-off policy means wildlife is delivered to vet clinics rather anonymously because both the van drivers and the 101 rescuers are unable to collect the animal even if the vet calls them straight back and says it's good to go, it has to go back into the WIRES callsheet system and a carer requested to collect the animal either for release or for ongoing care. The onus is now on carers to collect these animals but if they haven't done the rescue, or the animal was found at a location out of their local area and dropped off at their vet, they can be reluctant to collect it because then they have to drive to the location it was found to release it.

I know this feedback seems to be about wildlife rescuers and carers, but this explanation of how WIRES policies are changing shows they are adding to the workload being placed upon vets. To the point that some vet clinics are now advising WIRES that they will not accept wildlife from them. Rather than working with their local carers and seeing one or two animals a week, many vets are now finding themselves getting more wildlife just dropped off at their clinic. Vets should not be 'drop off centres' for wildlife. Unless WIRES is prepared to pay them for the time these animals spend in their clinics.

The 'Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy Plan' is currently underway and it is my belief that there must be collaboration between WIRES, the AVA, NPWS, NSW Wildlife Council and Dept of Environment in order to oversee **the entire sector**.

No one organisation should work in isolation when its policies and operations impact directly on the workload or work practices of the other agencies.

I believe confidence in the Wildlife Rescue Sector is also at an all-time low. There is an investigation ongoing into the high volunteer turnover within WIRES and many carers are of the opinion that the animal welfare outcomes are deteriorating, whilst the statistics for 'rescues completed' are probably better than ever.

The best outcomes for our vets and vet nurses, our wildlife rescuers and carers and for the Australian native wildlife is for the agencies that care for them to work together. And for there to be accountability when policies and guidelines are not being followed. We need consistency, collaboration and oversight.

WIRES presently has a new draft Constitution on exhibition that members are being asked to vote upon without seeing any of the associated By-Laws which would outline the Operational Procedures. The draft Constitution suggests that WIRES will put in place a Nominations subcommittee to ensure positions on the Board are put forward by a small group of people in the organisation. When asked if this Constitution or the By-Laws had been considered by NPWS, DPE, ACNC or the AVA, the Chair said that it wasn't necessary. This is WIRES and only affects how WIRES will operate. This seems short-sighted and could lead to even further unfavourable outcomes across the wildlife rescue sector – which would impact further on the veterinary sector.

Our vets and vet nurses are valuable, and we cannot let them be treated so badly because of their 'duty of care' to always attend to an animal that is suffering. The vets that donate their time to treat our wildlife must be fully supported and compensated by the government - and the private sector - that impact on their time when they destroy native habitat but don't consider it necessary to pay for the treatment of the wildlife injured and displaced when this occurs.

I hope this information can prove helpful.

Further information regarding issues pertinent to the Wildlife Rescue Sector that do have a knock-on effect on the veterinary industry:

<https://www.smh.com.au/environment/conservation/failure-to-spend-bushfire-donations-prompts-wires-board-defection-20220729-p5b5q8.html>

https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-08/wildlife-carers-welfare-concerns-vet-calls-system-change/102440856?utm_campaign=abc_news_web&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web

Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital needs donations to survive

<https://chng.it/54y2Bh6Nnf>