

Submission
No 202

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Date Received: 21 July 2023

I have been a small animal veterinarian for almost twenty years and have experienced firsthand the inappropriate treatment and normalised mistreatment of veterinarians by the industry. I would be happy to give evidence at a hearing. I am particularly addressing the veterinary shortage, retention rates, and mental health challenges. The following submission is based on my own opinions and experiences, and those of my colleagues.

The shortage of veterinarians and poor retention rates in the industry are influenced by the dysfunctional and toxic nature of the industry. Veterinarians are expected to work under intolerable conditions and to sacrifice their mental health and life outside of work. Older veterinarians will say that the newer generations are not resilient and are unsuited to being veterinarians, but the reality is that being a veterinarian is not compatible with being an actual member of society. The pressure that veterinarians are expected to work under, and the lack of a work-life balance, once experienced, is a life that many do not wish to continue. The problem largely lies with the expectations and practices of management within clinics.

Veterinary clinics are generally run by older principal veterinarians or by corporations. Older vets often worked long hours for poor pay and expect the same of their junior colleagues. They have created a toxic culture where vets are expected to work without breaks and work overtime without being paid. The nature of veterinary practice has changed with greater expectations and demands from clients regarding the health and welfare of their pets, placing increased pressure on veterinarians. Clients are more informed and veterinary medicine has drastically advanced, making the role of veterinarians more complex and intensive than it used to be.

Corporations have compounded the problem by wanting to extract as much from veterinarians as possible, working long hours for minimum pay. Veterinarians have become an equation in a money-making venture. Corporations often employ non-clinical management staff, with no compassion or empathy for the veterinarians, putting more and more pressure on them when they are already stretched to their limits.

Regardless of the employer and management, vets are under pressure from an unreasonable workload, demanding management, and exacting clients. They are under pressure to make money for the clinic, disproportionate to their salary, with the expectation that veterinarians will overservice to make money for a business that does not support them in return. Veterinarians are expected by employers to work constantly without a break. If they are given a break, this is the time to follow up their cases, type their notes and make phone calls. Employers will expect veterinarians to perform an unreasonable number of consults and procedures during a shift, with overbooking and double, even triple, booking being common. As management dictates bookings, a veterinarian has no control over how their day is managed.

This constant pressure on veterinarians, alongside the long hours worked, has a strain on their mental health. A constant battle against management for the basic rights they are entitled to adds further to stress. Veterinarians are also expected to work indefinite unpaid overtime after every shift. This makes it difficult for veterinarians to have any life outside of work, if any given shift has no known end. Endemic antiquated attitudes and toxic practices have a negative impact on the day to day lives of veterinarians. There is little incentive for vets to practise, when a change in career will give them a better quality of life and basic human rights.

The following are a few examples of treatment of veterinarians in general practice. Such examples are common:

- Not being allowed a lunch break, only being able to “eat something for five minutes while doing something else”.
- Advising management that veterinarians are entitled to breaks according to NSW Fair Work and being told “we don’t do that here”.
- Being told that veterinarians must “cover within the team” when another veterinarian is away, so that veterinarians are stretched beyond reasonable limits.
- A veterinarian negotiating a salary and being offered a package with continuing education allowance (which the employer was contractually obliged to give) as part of that package. When the veterinarian quit, the allowance was not paid out even though it was included as the salary, nor was it allowed to be used during the notice period.
- A veterinarian being told that toilet breaks were a cumulative part of break time and each toilet break had to be timed so that the total time could be deducted from a lunchbreak.
- A veterinarian giving more than 6 months of notice for a day off and being refused.
- Refusal of holidays with sufficient notice when annual leave is owing.
- Two veterinarians at the same practice getting married to each other, asking for the day off for their wedding and being told they had to change the date of their wedding.
- Management questioning a veterinarian having had the day off when a medical certificate had been provided.
- Taking the chairs away in a practice so no one can sit down and they always have to be working.
- A routine surgery having post-operative complications, no fault of the veterinarian that performed the surgery, and the employer electing to fire the veterinarian because the client threatened to go to another clinic.

Recommendations:

- An overarching regulatory body in support of veterinarians, run by veterinarians, enforcing the rights of veterinarians and holding practices accountable.
- Mandatory mental health training, mentorship and ongoing support.
- Re-evaluation of the Animal Care and Veterinary Services award to reflect modern practice.