

**Submission
No 207**

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

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Greetings,

I am aware that my submission is after the closing date.

It does concern me that I was only notified of this very significant enquiry by my NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board just 3 weeks ago.

Be aware that many statistics quoted about the veterinary profession, are provided by the AVA's (Australian Veterinary Association) own biennial surveys. These surveys cannot be regarded as accurate, given that they get only 30% response rates.

I graduated as a vet in 1975, and am currently practicing part time in the profession as a locum, working in most states of Australia.

The issue of veterinary shortage, has been developing over the past 10 years plus, not just post Covid, and certainly not just in NSW.

It started over 10 years ago, when corporations started buying up veterinary practices. Initially Green Cross, & now there are over 20 corporate entities owning more than 10% of practices in Australia. Covid has seen a large increase in pet ownership & need for veterinary services.

Corporate veterinary services have been setting up a significant number of new veterinary clinics linked to large pet supply companies.

The significance of corporatisation, is that it limits the career pathways for young vets, as the opportunity to own & run their own practice & earn a reasonable income, is greatly reduced.

As a full time employee, it would be extremely rare to be achieving a wage of over \$120,000, after having over 5 years experience. Less than 4 years ago, I have seen new graduates being paid less than the veterinary nurses' award wage.

Other factors leading to a shortage of veterinarians include:-

- A significantly high attrition rate of new & recent graduates from veterinary science, as the realisation of long work hours, high stress & poor remuneration becomes a reality.
- High feminisation of the veterinary workforce has unintended consequences. Nearly 70% of graduates are female. They make excellent, compassionate vets. Most go on to have families & are often out of the work force for several years. Many return to part time work either by choice, or because there is insufficient support for child minding and other services to allow resumption of longer full time hours.
- Veterinary science is one of the few professions that have historically had long opening hours – from as early as 7:30-8am, through to 6:30-7pm. Nearly all are open on Saturday morning & some even on Sunday. This leads to a poor work/life balance – adding to the increased stress that vets are under.
- Lack of any co-ordinated governance of the profession. Most management & control of the veterinary industry is undertaken at the state level. Each of the individual state boards seem to have their own 'agendas' Some of these state veterinary boards are quite overbearing & punitive – not at all supportive of the profession. This puts increased stress on already overworked, underpaid and stressed young graduates.

The main concern I see for this enquiry, as related to insufficient vets in rural practices, is that there is no overall federal governance. This issue is far from a state concern – it is an Australia wide issue & the federal government should be taking a much greater interest in helping to overcome it. If we were to get an exotic disease outbreak in Australia at present (such as foot & mouth disease), we definitely do not have the resources to deal with it.

In NSW there is at least a rural veterinary institution (Charles Sturt University, Wagga), graduates of which are more likely to remain working in the country.

To encourage more graduates to work in the country regions, there could be trade offs put in place against a not inconsiderable hecs debt (over \$80,000). A pro rata reduction in hecs debt for each year worked in a rural practice up to 5 years, is an obvious first step. It provides other 'hidden' advantages. As there are few country 'specialist centres', vets working in rural areas will undertake a greater range of more complex medical & surgical procedures, helping to greatly improve the general skill levels of the veterinary 'general practitioners'.

An instant knee jerk reaction, is to import overseas vets. This 'may' help in the short term to reduce the shortage. BUT, there would need to be incentives for imported vets, to work in rural areas. These imported vets are most likely going to be willing to work for lesser money, further exacerbating the long term problem of getting more Australian graduates.

I trust that you may be able to get positive outcomes from this enquiry, as they are urgently needed.

Kind regards,
Jon Holcombe BVSc