

**Submission
No 208**

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

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Submission to the Legislative Council Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in New South Wales.

I am a veterinarian operating a small animal practice in Coffs Harbour. I graduated in 1994 and have worked in clinical practice since graduating. I have been the owner and principal of Rose Avenue Veterinary Hospital and Toormina Road Veterinary Clinic since 2001. I work a minimum of 40 hours a week and currently employ 2 part-time veterinarians and desperately need another full-time veterinarian to help manage our workload.

1) The shortage of veterinarians across the profession from a regional practice perspective.

The shortage of veterinarians is dire. This situation is not restricted to NSW or even to Australia but it seems it is unfortunately the case throughout the world – certainly it is in the UK, USA and Canada and New Zealand.

Locally every practice in Coffs Harbour and surrounds is currently seeking to employ at least one more veterinarian.

Over the 21 years that I have owned my practice the situation has progressively deteriorated. Now it is impossible. I have been searching for a veterinarian, advertising constantly for over three years now. In that time, I have received two applicants, both South African, one ended up staying in South Africa and the other had many job offers and accepted a position in Sydney.

2) The challenges in maintaining a sustainable Veterinary workforce including recruitment and retention rates.

As a small business, as many veterinary practices are, there is no dedicated human resources person in my practice and I outsource recruitment. The two services that we use have an international presence and I believe an adequate reach.

Retention is a huge challenge.

Working as a veterinarian is hard and the income not particularly high. Veterinarians are in general high achievers and highly educated. They have the ability to succeed in many different fields and so have many employment options. Given the difficult demands – emotional, financial and physical – many veterinarians leave the field after just a few years for better paid, less demanding positions.

Factors that I believe contribute to this includes:

- 1) Inappropriate undergraduate selection at university entry.
- 2) Long hours.
- 3) Relatively low pay compared to other professions.
- 4) Gender imbalance.
- 5) Unrealistic client expectations.

3) The burn-out and mental health challenges facing the Veterinary Profession.

This is a significant issue for many and has certainly worsened of late due to the workforce shortage and increased demand for our services.

Some of the stress flows on from client's inability or unwillingness to pay for veterinary care for their pet. Some is the result of client's lack of understanding of the costs of veterinary care.

Veterinary staff are frequently unable to provide the level of care that they would like to for these reasons. This has a mental health impact on the staff, which unfortunately is often exacerbated by clients pressuring veterinary staff to provide the care at reduced cost or worse abusing staff.

Programs are needed to educate the pet owning public about the true cost of owning a pet as many are unaware or give it little thought when purchasing a pet.

Another major source of mental health challenges is the provision of after-hours services.

4) The role of, and challengers affecting overseas trained veterinarians.

Overseas trained veterinarians are a valuable resource for us.

Over the years I have employed several overseas trained veterinarians including veterinarians trained in the UK, India and Costa Rica.

Overseas trained veterinarians face all the challenges that locally trained veterinarians face and more. They also must learn how to practice in a new country, in some cases communicate in a foreign language and unfortunately some will face racist attitudes.

The biggest hurdle of all though is getting accredited to practice here and getting through the nightmare that is the visa process.

5) The arrangements and impacts of providing after-hours Veterinary services in a regional location.

The provision of after-hours veterinary services is probably one of the most significant challenges facing regional and rural practices.

Outside of Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong veterinary practices do not have the luxury of being able to refer their after-hours calls to a dedicated after-hours service.

It is the least enjoyable part of veterinary practice, but it is an essential part of the occupation. Unfortunately, it is now not uncommon for locum and employee veterinarians to offer their services but refuse to do after-hours work.

A significant portion of after-hours calls are not for true emergencies. These could be filtered out by using dedicated answering/triaging services. One such service does exist however its pricing structure is unsustainable to a small regional/rural practice.

The development of veterinary consultation after-hours services by remote online video calls on a user pays basis would alleviate some of the impacts on regional/rural practices.

6) The role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals.

In our area the local council does not provide any service for stray dogs outside of council hours and no service whatsoever for cats. This puts a lot of pressure

on the local veterinarians particularly after-hours when many strays are picked up by members of the public.

Members of the public will often bring strays into veterinary clinics to get them scanned because they know that if presented to the pound the owner will have to pay a release fee or worse the animal may be euthanased. At the veterinary clinic these good samaritans will not take no for an answer. There needs to be an education program to make people aware that stray animals must, by law, be taken to the local council pound.

The situation is of course worse after-hours when people will at times become abusive if we refuse to come in from home, open up our practice and take in a stray animal.

7) The role played by Veterinarians in providing care to sick and injured wildlife.

Our practice provides veterinary care to hundreds of native animals every year. The dollar value of this public service is substantial.

Wildlife is a public asset and responsibility, and it is well and truly time for the government to lift its game and start providing for veterinary care for all our wildlife – not just the high profile creatures like koalas and whales.

Publicly funded wildlife hospitals would be ideal however not realistic throughout the state and could exacerbate staff shortages elsewhere. An alternative would be adequately funding wildlife groups so that they could pay for veterinary treatment of wildlife. Perhaps a fee schedule for such treatment could worked out between National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Australian Veterinary Association.

It is grossly unfair that privately owned practices are forced to fund the care and treatment of wildlife out of their own finances. Adequate compensation for this may go part way to addressing one of the factors (remuneration) that contributes to the drain of staff from practice.

8) Current barriers to accessing Veterinary care in regional and rural areas and strategies to improve access.

The provision of veterinary care is not cheap, and people need to be made aware of this. Owning a pet is a privilege not a right as so many seem to believe. If you take on a pet, you also take on the responsibilities associated with this, and people need to be aware of this.

There are already several charities that will assist those on lower incomes with veterinary care and I believe that this model works. I do not see a role for taxpayer funded veterinary care as pet ownership is an individual decision and responsibility.

9) Other Issues

Over the last couple of decades veterinarians have seen a constant erosion of income sources. These include market driven changes that have seen the loss of veterinary ethical sales to pet supply chains (online and physical stores) as well as legislative changes that have seen some tasks previously performed only by veterinarians (eg pregnancy testing) de-regulated and some medications removed from S4 scheduling (eg Meloxicam). The effect of this is to remove profitable income sources from practices that in many cases cross subsidised the provision of less profitable or charitable services.

The profit margins in veterinary practice are thin and younger veterinarians are increasingly reluctant to commit to practice ownership. This is also clear from the performance of the corporate veterinary practices that whilst they have

buying power that smaller practices lack, they have struggled and have either been absorbed by competitors (such as NVC-National Veterinary Care) or ended up in the hands of private equity groups (Greencross). If the provision of veterinary services is to continue there needs to be sufficient opportunity for employed veterinarians and practice owners to receive adequate financial reward for their efforts.

Legislators need to recognise the value of maintaining a mentally and financially healthy veterinary sector which is frankly struggling.

10) Strategies

Education campaigns that explain the responsibilities of pet ownership and associated costs.

Improved provision of council-based services for stray cats and dogs.

Support for widely accessible user pays after-hours services.

Financial assistance to young veterinarians committing to practice in regional and rural areas. For example, lobby the Federal Government to waive HECS repayment for these candidates who commit to working in rural and regional areas whilst they remain there.

Financial support to all veterinarians providing veterinary care to wildlife.

Better selection of students entering veterinary science courses, focusing on those that understand the realities of veterinary practice and have an aptitude for the profession.

Improve the gender balance of students entering veterinary science courses.