

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 4 - REGIONAL NSW**

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

**CORRECTED**

**At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Wednesday 30 August 2023**

**The Committee met at 9:30 am**

**PRESENT**

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Chair)  
Ms Abigail Boyd  
The Hon. Greg Donnelly  
The Hon. Wes Fang  
The Hon. Emma Hurst (Deputy Chair)  
The Hon. Taylor Martin  
The Hon. Sarah Mitchell  
The Hon. Cameron Murphy



**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the second hearing of the Portfolio Committee No. 4 - Regional NSW inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales. The inquiry is examining issues contributing to the growing shortage of veterinarians in New South Wales and the impacts the shortage is having on the provision of veterinary services for animals and their owners, and the welfare of veterinarians and vet nurses. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Today we will hear from a number of stakeholders, including animal-welfare organisations, vet nurse educators, schools of veterinary science, regulators, professional associations and government. While many witnesses will appear in person, some will appear via videoconference today. I thank all witnesses for making the time to give evidence to this important inquiry. Before we commence, I make some brief comments about procedures. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website, and a transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, the House has authorised the filming, broadcast and photography of committee proceedings by representatives of media organisations from any position in the room and by any member of the public from any position in the audience. That includes a documentary filmmaker. Any person filming or photographing proceedings must take responsibility for the proper use of that material. That is detailed in the broadcasting resolution, a copy of which is available from the secretariat.

While parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses giving evidence in New South Wales today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the hearing. Therefore, I urge witnesses to be careful about comments they may make to the media or to others after they complete their evidence. Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. In that regard, it is important that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. If witnesses are unable to answer a question today and want more time to respond, they can take a question on notice. Written answers to questions taken on notice are to be provided within 21 days. If witnesses wish to hand up documents, they should do so through the committee staff.

To aid the audibility of the hearing today, I remind both committee members and witnesses to speak into the microphones. As we have a number of witnesses appearing in person and via videoconference, it may be helpful to identify who questions are directed to and who is speaking. For those with hearing difficulties who are present in the room today, please note that the room is filled with induction loops compatible with hearing aid systems that have telecoil receivers. Finally, would everyone please turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing.

**Ms KRISTINA VESK**, Chief Executive Officer, Cat Protection Society, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** We now welcome our first witness. Would you like to make a short opening statement before we proceed to questions?

**KRISTINA VESK:** I'd like to thank the Committee for holding this important inquiry and for inviting Cat Protection here today. Cat Protection works in a one health/one welfare framework, and so we place a high value on the sustainability of the veterinary workforce. Our strategies to support this include working with vets in private practice, encouraging cat owners to develop relationships with their local vets, educating the public on the importance of preventative health, supporting low-income cat owners with discounted and subsidised essential services such as desexing and vaccination, actively recruiting vet students as paid employees and providing placement opportunities for students, and financially investing in feline health and medicine research at the University of Sydney and clinics.

We acknowledge with deep gratitude that vets discount their services to us. We, in return, are a good customer. We pay our bills, and we fund difficult and complex cases that clinics might not otherwise see as private clients might not afford them. We have been witnessing the increasing pressures on the vet workforce over many years, and the situation is now critical. From a feline welfare perspective, increased waiting times for cat desexings are a disaster. Kittens as young as 14 weeks can get pregnant, and even a nursing queen can get pregnant. Their remarkable fertility is a constant welfare challenge, made more difficult without rapid access to desexing surgery. Beyond cats, as we noted in our submission, investment in veterinary health is an investment in human health. Veterinarians are essential health workers, and the shortage in the veterinary workforce is a public health issue.

**The CHAIR:** The Committee has resolved to have free-flow questions, Kristina, so questions will come from anywhere.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Thank you for coming here today. You mentioned in your submission that your charity has paid \$900,000 in vet bills just last year. We heard yesterday an argument that was put forward—and I note it wasn't actually vets that put forward this argument; it was another organisation—that charities should be responsible for taking on more of the costs associated with the care of stray and homeless animals as well as wildlife to take that burden off vets. I wanted to know what your response was. Is this bill of \$900,000 something that most charities can continue to afford to take on? If not, what is the best solution here?

**KRISTINA VESK:** I guess, as a starting point, charities are always dependent on charitable giving. It's up to us to maintain some kind of savings and some kind of sustainability for ourselves but, at the end of the day, we exist at the grace of our donors. By the same token, it's our obligation to spend that money and not hoard it completely. I think it's completely reasonable that we pay a fair and reasonable price for services that we purchase. In this case, for us, it is largely desexing surgeries but also other surgeries and vaccinations and other feline health issues. Put the wildlife issue aside, because that's not our bailiwick, but I find it really disturbing that vets aren't paid for that, and I think they ought to be.

I think that we, as Cat Protection, have tried to educate the community a lot about the fact that vets, like everyone else, deserve to be paid when they go to work. The idea that because you work with animals somehow all your labour should be free, I'm not quite sure where that comes from. Most people, when they go to work, they get paid, and I think that people should get paid and they should be paid fairly. We work with vets in private practice; we don't employ them. A part of our strategy is to support vets in private practice because they're running businesses and they need to be sustainable. Throughout time—I mean, yes, obviously now there is a huge demand and more pets post-pandemic, but I think it's really important that the way we work with them is to try to be a part of their business sustainability.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** One thing that was talked about quite a lot yesterday was particularly for, say, lower income earners to be able to access some kind of scheme where they could get reduced veterinary costs. I know there was a small grant from the Government around desexing last year. Do you think that there needs to be more of this? Should rescue organisations that are taking in homeless and stray cats and dogs also be able to access some kind of scheme where they could get reduced-cost veterinary care so that the vets were still being paid in full but the rescue groups weren't having to take on this enormous burden?

**KRISTINA VESK:** It crosses over a lot of areas, and I think it crosses into your pounds inquiry as well, because I think pounds are getting better at releasing animals only when they're desexed, but we know that that's not always the case. I think anyone other than a registered breeder who is releasing an animal to another registered breeder should be desexing before that animal is released, full stop, and that should be paid for at that point.

If people are adopting from our shelter, for example, they're not paying anything close to the full cost of what has been spent on the cat before they adopt. For a \$150 adoption fee, the cat is desexed, vaccinated,

microchipped and registered. I mean, they cannot get that for that price. Most of the animal charities do have programs to support people on low incomes with essential vet care. To answer the question, there definitely needs to be more money available to support those programs. How that is distributed is a separate question, but it's not for the vets to pay for it. And they already do subsidise it. I mean, we would have spent well over \$1 million on vet bills last year if it weren't for the fact that they're discounting their fees to us.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Is it the same sort of financial problems with councils? One argument that we've had in this inquiry—and one of the submissions—is that council take on more responsibility and more costs in really taking on the care of more animals. In your experience working with councils, do they have the capability or the financial ability to take on more than they already are throughout New South Wales?

**KRISTINA VESK:** I think it's utterly variable. I would say definitely no in some regional and rural/remote places. They simply don't have the money; they don't have the resources. But I think that it's really important that we do look at companion animals, as well as all other animals, in a one-welfare context and look at the costs to the community if their welfare is poor or if they're not desexed or if they're not vaccinated, and all the risks that go with that. We also look at the benefits to the whole of the community, which are enormous. There's savings to the health system; there's improved mental health; there's perceptions of community friendliness and amenity. There are so many benefits that are economically, and not-economically necessarily, measurable.

We're sitting at about 70 per cent of people having a companion animal—many more people still would like to have one and don't; many have had one in the past and don't. People consume animals in many different ways, whether as food or for work. Animals are ubiquitous. I think that their care and welfare is the responsibility of the whole of community, and I don't think we should be just tying that to pet owners or councils. We need to look at it in a really big picture way that recognises when animal health and welfare are good, so are human health and welfare.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you for your submission and for coming in today. I wanted to ask you about the part of your submission where you talk about the role of veterinary nurses because this is something that the Committee was looking at yesterday as well, and we've got some more witnesses today. It's interesting here where you offer the idea of a possible solution of a contracted-in special sort of vet practice and really having that qualification in vet practice administration, like there is for health. Yesterday we had, for instance, a vet who appeared remotely talk about how at her practice the vets are mainly employed part time, because that sort of suits the work-life balance, but then they've got business managers and people to do that separate admin side of things as well. Could you talk to us more about that idea, where you think that might be useful and thoughts on whether that's something the Committee should look at recommending as well?

**KRISTINA VESK:** I think where it came from is seeing that a lot of vet clinics are superb at looking after animals, superb at caring for their clients—not great at admin. You know, "We want to pay you. We'll have to chase up a bill." And it's complex. There's other record keeping that goes with their registration that is complex. I know a lot of the discussion and concern is about the after-hours in rural and remote. When there's that much pressure on the vet to simply do those essential surgical and medical works, to then have to do all the other things—and they're sometimes but not always, necessarily, the same kind of mindset who are good at these different things.

I just think there's an opportunity there for exploring that area as being able to be provided as a part of the veterinary sector, but as a discrete part, with expertise. We do have that in the human health sector, and I think it could be helpful. I think I mentioned in there as well that vet work, whether in nursing or as a veterinarian, is quite physically difficult and a lot of people have injuries. It's also a really good opportunity for using all those skills that people have developed in the sector, while not putting those physical, bodily demands on them when they can no longer do that. So not losing all their great knowledge.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yesterday we also spoke a bit about the universities and courses, and how there's not a lot in terms of business admin and things. Obviously that's a separate thing if you do buy your own business—and that's probably true of a lot of degrees—but we spoke about how you get that balance right and make sure that people who are going into the profession understand what the different roles are, and how you can all complement each other. I thought that was an interesting call-out.

**KRISTINA VESK:** You're absolutely right. The curriculum is so packed with other things. To then put on that "Oh, by the way, you have to be really good at running a small business with so many different compliance obligations" is really hard.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's a lot of pressure.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** Thank you again for appearing at this inquiry and many other inquiries, and for all of the work that you do. In your submission you talk about how recently two of your regional partner clinics

have closed because of vet shortages. We've spoken a lot about what we do in the regions to try to create vibrant veterinary practices. If we look at it, we've got small private practices and we've got an increasing number of corporatised practices. What we don't have anymore are government-run practices. I understand we used to in the fifties and sixties—half of our vets were in the public service—so that has changed. In terms of the impact on regional practices, how much of it is about the business and profit problems? How much is about running a small business and how much of it, do you think, is about vets not wanting to work in those areas? What do you put it down to?

**KRISTINA VESK:** In the two cases that I know about, one was selling a practice and couldn't find anyone wishing to take over. I don't think it had anything to do with the profitability; it was just the whole responsibility and so on. With the other one, they have two clinics and they had to close one because they just couldn't get people to move there. They couldn't find vets to staff it. They didn't have enough people to run across the two, so they had to make a decision. I think that was probably some of the discussion you had yesterday about infrastructure and support systems—things like education and childcare. All those things need to be in regional centres to attract people. I'm guessing—I can't say—that definitely plays role.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** When one of those clinics closes, what then happens to the work that clinic was doing? Presumably it puts more stress on other—

**KRISTINA VESK:** Yes. We now depend on their one clinic. That puts a lot of pressure on their clinic. It's more travel time for people—like, a lot of travel time for people. I guess it just means the service isn't there, it's more difficult to access and then the consequences flow from that. Particularly with a lot of the regional services, they're not doing just companion animals but they're doing mixed practice, so everyone suffers. I hope this Committee will find some pointers to answer how it can be improved. But the answer to the question is that you just go to the other vet, you travel further, there are more delays and there is more stress. That then only compounds the issue because the practices that remain are under increasing pressure. That's really hard.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** I'm happy to ask just one question. Yesterday we heard some evidence about price shock being an issue, where people will take their animal to a vet and may be shocked at the cost of those veterinary services. I note that in your submission you raise that, in a way, where prices can be unexpected. You say that some clinics might be perceived to be charging a low amount when, in fact, it's a high amount. Do you think that some regulation around that—for example, requiring vets to publish fees for particular services or entering into costs agreements—would be useful?

**KRISTINA VESK:** I'm not sure that's necessarily needed. We encourage people to phone around but, if they're our client, we can make referrals for them. Cat Protection has commissioned Ipsos to do cat-welfare surveys for us for a few years now. We have just received the latest one, which I can email to the Committee, and that found a huge gap in people's perceptions of the cost of desexing. This has been consistently found over four different surveys: People who had had their cat desexed thought it was much cheaper and people who hadn't had their cats desexed thought it was much more expensive. It was like \$100 different.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** So it's more of an education issue?

**KRISTINA VESK:** Yes, I think it is. A lot of private practice clinics have really affordable rates. It's not a fact that necessarily private clinics charge more. People need to shop around but, also, if they have a cat, call us because we can help. That perception that desexing costs more than it actually does then also leads to people delaying desexing their cats because they think they can't afford it, and that's the time gap where the cat can get pregnant. Then we have more kittens, and then we have to get more cats desexed. It is problematic. Some clinics do publish their general fees. That's something for them to decide, isn't it? A lot of people will be quite open about what they charge because they see that as a positive thing. But I would always encourage people to phone because there isn't a standard rate. Maybe that's an issue—that people think there is. They think, "I was quoted \$400 for a desexing; that must be the going rate." It's a good point.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you for coming along today. I receive your journal on a regular basis and I appreciate being on the mailing list for it. We had some discussion with witnesses yesterday over the matter of pet insurance, the implications of having insurance and, through the insurance policy, being able to deal with a range of matters associated with pets. I am just wondering about your thoughts, or the organisation's thoughts, about pet insurance, its value and the capacity for perhaps expanding it over time to reach a broader population of people who own pets. Do you have any general views about pet insurance?

**KRISTINA VESK:** I think it's the right choice for some people; I don't think it's necessarily the right choice for everyone. I'd be really reluctant to say one way or the other because I'd feel like that was giving financial advice. If people's cats are desexed, vaccinated, they go for a check-up every year and they're kept indoors and safe, they're going to be pretty good. And then if you have the money to take out insurance, that's great. But if you

don't, we recommend to people to put aside a dollar a day. That's over \$300 a year. That will pay for the annual vaccination, the annual vet check and the parasite treatment. There are costs associated, even with cats, who are generally more low maintenance than dogs. But insurance definitely plays a role in the big picture, and it's a matter for the pet owner to decide whether they're going to save, deal with what comes to them or take insurance.

On a personal level, I get nervous about things like loans because there's a lot of people in a lot of financial distress. It's different if you can afford a loan. Those things are complicated and I think that that is where we do need some good animal welfare that can be supported through charities and so on. If we're talking about huge, expensive surgeries or cancer treatment, I think there's a whole lot of things to consider there, beyond the cost. Sometimes people ought to consider the ethics of treating the animal if it's not necessarily in their best interests—like overtreating, because it makes the person feel good but the treatment is making the animal suffer. I think it is so case by case.

Back to my earlier point, we really encourage people to develop a good relationship with their vet. That's the person who you can then have a good conversation with about whether insurance is right for you because they'll know well the health status of your pet and can talk you through more examples. I know people who have had it and it has been amazing and really helped them with expensive but really treatable and manageable situations. It's been terrific. I think it has a role to play.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Related to that, in some sense, is the general understanding in the populace at large about the cost of owning a pet. Do you have a sense from the work you've done over a period of time and the organisation's dealing with cats over many years whether there is a mature understanding by the population at large about the cost of owning a pet or whether it's something that only really comes to full fruition once they take on having a pet?

**KRISTINA VESK:** I think it's definitely improved. I think there is greater understanding, appreciation and thoughtfulness about understanding that they're a part of your family budget. But I think we still have—and I've heard this from vets—people who have paid several thousands of dollars for some designer dog who then go, "I spent all that money, now I don't have to spend more." They've purchased some brachycephalic dog from a puppy farmer and then the dog can't breathe and then they need surgery. That surgery is going to cost \$5,000 and that anger is taken out on the vet. I still think we have a lot of education to do on the health problems of a lot of the popular breeds of pets and we should be doing things to stop that. But I think most people are pretty good at understanding how to look after their animal and how to budget for them.

Most cat owners are seeing the vet each year, which is great. Most cats are getting vaccinated, which is great. We can always do more but I think it's good. I think we do need to do more outreach. Cat Protection has tried with materials in languages other than English. We have vet services listed on our website where languages other than English are spoken. I think vet services are still sometimes perceived as something of a privilege and a luxury and people don't always feel very welcome. It can be intimidating, particularly when people don't know the costs that might be ahead. I think there's a lot of work to be done in the sector on embracing the whole community and helping everyone understand animal health, welfare and behaviour and have the best relationship they can with their animals.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** This question is on behalf of a colleague who could not be present and apologises. The Australian Veterinary Association submission No. 144 to the inquiry suggests a number of recommendations for the Committee to consider. On notice, would you be prepared to look at those recommendations and, through the secretariat, provide any feedback that you might have?

**KRISTINA VESK:** I will provide some information on notice but, straight up, I can say, at the headlines, we support them. I'm not qualified to comment on all of them, but the headline 16 recommendations, yes, we support them.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for coming in and having a discussion with us and providing evidence. I think that last question was the only question you took on notice, so the committee secretariat will be in touch. You have 21 days to get back to us with that response.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**Mr GARY FITZGERALD**, President, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia, sworn and examined

**Dr PATRICIA CLARKE**, Chair, Educators for the Allied Veterinary Health Professions in Higher Education (Australia), sworn and examined

**Dr COURTNEY BASKERVILLE**, Chair, The Veterinary Nursing Research Group, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** I now welcome our next witnesses. Would any of you like to make a short opening statement? I might start with you, Mr Fitzgerald.

**GARY FITZGERALD:** I'd like to start by thanking you all for offering me the opportunity to come today to this hearing to discuss the very important topic of veterinary workforce shortages in New South Wales. Although the VNCA's submission is primarily focused around paragraph (d) within the terms of reference—"the role of, and challenges facing, veterinary nurses"—I also believe our submission and recommendations are relevant to a number of other paragraphs, particularly the physical shortage of veterinarians, the burnout, occupational stress and mental health challenges faced by our veterinarian colleagues, as well as access to veterinary care across New South Wales, particularly in rural and regional areas.

The VNCA is advocating for a move towards professionalisation of veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in Australia, acknowledging that, to positively affect the workloads of our vet colleagues, this can only be achieved by having another professional body that could absorb some of that workload. This could be achieved by our priority recommendation, which is to create protection of title through mandatory regulation and registration of veterinary nurses and technicians in Australia. Vet nurses and techs are well positioned to affect the workloads of veterinarians through increased utilisation and autonomy in their workplace. This recognises the comprehensive training that they have undergone to complete the national standard of either a certificate IV in veterinary nursing or one of the bachelor degrees in either veterinary nursing or veterinary technology.

Registration and regulation would also positively affect the veterinary nurses and technicians in many ways. I would expect to see not only increased utilisation and recognition of the integral work that they perform within the healthcare team but also increased remuneration and creation of career pathways that are really lacking. These would, hopefully, reduce attrition rates. These are common challenges that have been expressed by our association membership historically. To achieve this, the VNCA has already started working. We have created a voluntary Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician Registration Scheme, called AVNAT. This scheme was introduced in 2019. We are currently in continued discussions with the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, the regulatory body for the vets, regarding the next step to adopt this registration scheme, with the aim to move it towards mandatory nationwide regulation and registration of veterinary nurses and technicians. This scheme is already functioning—we have over 1,000 registered nurses and technicians—and would be an opportune model to be considered for future legislation change for New South Wales. Thank you.

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** I would also like to thank the Committee for this opportunity. I am here this morning to represent the educators and graduates of the three paraprofessional Bachelor of Veterinary Technology programs from the University of Queensland, Charles Sturt University and University of Adelaide, and the Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing, which is a partnership between Melbourne Polytechnic and La Trobe University. We believe that it is actually time for innovative reforms within the veterinary profession, based on the interprofessional teams successfully modelled in the human health care and dental professions, for example. Concurring with the AVA, we urgently need legislative reforms for national registration and regulation of veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians to create a regulated veterinary interprofessional team and to set professional standards for the public good and in the best interests of the health and welfare of animals. The VNCA's current voluntary AVNAT registration scheme, supported by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, is well on the way to achieving this goal. Government support at both State and Federal level is critical.

Veterinary nurses in the United Kingdom achieved national mandatory registration and regulation in 2015. Our near neighbours, Japan, actually licensed all qualified veterinary technologists and veterinary nurses by a unanimous vote through Parliament in 2019. We need to catch up. The Australian Government's Frawley report made this recommendation in 2003. We also advocate for protection of their title, along with increasing their scope of practice in a multi-pronged approach to address the veterinarian shortage. That includes supporting the AVA recommendations.

Quoting Kogan and Stewart from the United States—when talking about the state of the veterinary profession in 2009, they said the veterinarian can no longer do it all or do it alone. We totally agree and believe it is time for a paradigm shift. We need an advanced veterinary nurse role that harnesses the substantially untapped power residing in our veterinary nurses, particularly our bachelor degree veterinary nurses and technicians, to maximise their capabilities, which are currently, in many cases, highly under-utilised, and to provide a much-

needed career pathway for their job satisfaction and career advancement and to get the very best out of them so we can actually help the veterinarians.

Recent research from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research has shown that higher education graduates have a greater capacity to work autonomously and take on increased responsibility. This is just what the veterinary profession needs to alleviate its workloads. We are not alone in this thinking. In 2022 the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, in the UK, which is the regulatory body for veterinary nurses and vets, devised a seven-point workforce action plan. Number three on that list was the upskilling of veterinary nurses and giving them more autonomy. We also advocate for HECS-HELP debt relief for graduate vet techs and veterinary nurses and recent veterinary graduates to entice them to work in rural areas. The tax cuts afforded to schoolteachers and health professionals could also be extended to them. We do this to safeguard our national biosecurity, as well as in the best interests of the health and welfare of our production and companion animals.

**COURTNAY BASKERVILLE:** The Veterinary Nursing Research Group also thanks the Committee for having us today. As you will hear, and hopefully you've read in the submissions, the veterinary nurse plays a pivotal role in providing contemporary veterinary services. Despite this, the veterinary nursing profession continues to be underutilised and disenfranchised. As a result, veterinary nurses are leaving the profession due to what has been termed "the dissatisfaction crisis", which is further contributing to the challenges of the veterinary workforce shortages.

Mandatory registration and legislation to underpin and clarify the work and the role of the veterinary nurse has not been pursued outside Western Australia, despite support from both professional organisations and wider industry, and recommendations for this as a result of the evaluation report of the veterinary industry in 2015. Whilst we recognise that mandatory registration and legislation across all jurisdictions will be difficult to achieve, what I hope that you will hear over the course of this hearing is that the associated benefits of this will enable mobilisation of this highly skilled and dedicated profession, increasing trust from associated professional groups and ultimately empowering this profession to contribute their unique and essential knowledge of patient care and client support to better the veterinary team environment.

**The CHAIR:** I will start off with some clarifying questions around your submission, Mr Fitzgerald. It states:

The regulation of veterinary nurse and veterinary technician professionals will:

- Raise minimum standards and facilitate consistency in education, ...

Are you saying that the current qualifications and training that the nurse technicians and the veterinary nurses go through are not providing that consistency? There is a national body that governs vocational education, and their mantra is basically to provide consistency in vocational education. How does registering the vet nurses and technicians provide that consistency in education if it should already be provided by ASQA?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** There are a couple of parts to my answer to that. There are multiple current qualifications. Some of them are not recognised. The vocational is the national standard and it certainly covers a lot of the minimum day-one competencies that we're alerting to. For me, it's a lot about what comes after graduation as well.

**The CHAIR:** Are you talking about post-graduation education in terms of maintaining currency and that stuff?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** Yes. Maintaining currency is important because, in reality, they could graduate and not—because there is no requirement to go and do continual professional development—update any of their clinical skills. All of that would be standardised across the nation, which would certainly help.

**The CHAIR:** You've got a voluntary registration scheme at the moment and you said that you have 1,000 members already registered. Is there a registration fee or an accreditation fee that you charge for that?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** Yes, there is a registration fee.

**The CHAIR:** What is that fee? You can take that on notice if you like.

**GARY FITZGERALD:** I will take it on notice; that would be good. There is a small registration fee. Currently they can get discounts on that combined with membership with the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia as well. The idea would be hopefully, in the future, if it was picked up by another regulatory body, then that registration fee would remain.

**The CHAIR:** Currently you're collecting the registration fee as a voluntary system?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** But if it went to a national registration, you would forfeit that responsibility?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** Yes, that's right.

**The CHAIR:** What are you using that registration fee for at the moment?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** In reality, it is to continue to support the creation of AVNAT. There was a significant financial input from the VNCA to create it and also to continue to push and drive the initiatives of the VNCA for our memberships, like supplying evidence today and continuing to develop our strategy forward, particularly with our other associations, like the AVBC and AVA together, to try and make a united approach forward.

**The CHAIR:** My only other question for you is that one of the other suggestions you say that regulation will provide is an alignment with international standards. Once again, are you talking about that postgraduate education or are there also concerns about the alignment of our current diploma courses et cetera with international standards? Do we need to look at our vocational education courses and our university courses in terms of their alignment with international standards as well?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** I may not be the best person to answer that one, so I will take it on notice.

**The CHAIR:** I might direct it to you, Dr Clarke. Do we need to do some work in terms of modernising our vocational education courses?

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** We do. Would you mind if I go back to where you were talking about consistency across the vocational education qualifications?

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely.

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** I am also the Chair of the National Industry Advisory Group for Veterinary Nursing. Anecdotally, at this point, there is quite a lot of discussion about the inconsistencies between the different providers, and that has been fairly historically evident. In 2010 the Australian Veterinary Association, Queensland Division, conducted a survey, and that was reflected in the survey. Going back to the beginning of the National Industry Advisory Council in 1996, there were articles in the Australian Veterinary Association journal about, again, the inconsistency of the qualification.

The NIAG actually intends to conduct a survey in the near future to determine what the current status is because the vocational qualifications are up for review in 2024. That would really be a pivotal period for looking at the points that you have made. Certainly, in terms of aligning with, for example, the United States—and perhaps Courtney could comment on that—and the UK, which are our two prime models, there is a little bit of tweaking to be done. But, certainly, with the VNCA Day One Competency Standards and Day One Skills—the VNCA based those on the RCVS, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, or the UK model. So we are fairly well in alignment, but there is still some work to be done.

**The CHAIR:** Are the concerns that have been raised about consistency the very similar concerns that a lot of people have around private providers in vocational education? That is, if you pay enough, they'll whip you through the qualifications in record time and not necessarily focus on the quality of delivery but just churn as many people through the course as possible. Are you hearing that concern across your group?

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** We do, but I say that it's not as serious as it was. I might mention the Open Colleges situation going back a few years ago. That was a major concern. Things have dramatically improved since then because of the actions of the AVA and the VNCA. But there is still that concern about some inconsistency and, obviously, if an occupation is professionalising, it's very important that the standards are maintained or elevated.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** Thank you for your detailed submissions and for coming along today. I wanted to tease out a little bit more about what we could be getting registered veterinary nurses to do that vets are currently doing and what sort of percentage of the average vet's work that that would relieve them from.

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** Are you asking me, sorry?

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** Any of you, please go ahead.

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** I would like to take that on notice for more detail. But, just briefly, our higher education group actually has developed a set of higher level skills that we believe higher education graduates—and some very experienced vocational nurses as well—have the potential to perform. Some of those are definitely in the realms of the veterinarians' scope at the moment. Some examples from the large-animal sector would be doing things like Metrichecking, which is identifying cows with endometritis, perhaps even dehorning, dry cow therapy, nasogastric tubing in horses potentially. There's quite a list. As I say, it's across 13 domains and I think

certainly in the small-animal field I could see bachelor-degree veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians undertaking tasks such as inducing anaesthesia. Probably Gary and Courtney might be able to talk a little bit more about that.

**COURTNEY BASKERVILLE:** If I can add something to that as well, we consistently talk about what more could we be doing but also we need to recognise—there's a document that I've submitted to you within there that suggests that actually vets are currently performing tasks that nurses are capable of doing. If they allowed us to do the tasks that we are trained to do, as documented in our VNCA day one competencies, that would also relieve some stress. There is also further education around utilising veterinary nurses to the full scope of their capabilities and potential as well.

**GARY FITZGERALD:** Absolutely. I think what it comes down to is there is certainly ambiguity amongst the States in legislation on what is considered an act of veterinary science, and in reality I would be aiming that veterinary nurses and technicians could act in roles in holistic views of everything that happens in a veterinary hospital that isn't specifically needed to be done by a qualified veterinarian. That resembles so many things. It comes from education of clients and preventative medicine, high-quality patient care, the really high-quality technical skills. A lot of these technical skills get developed in that postgraduate period with continuing education, continuing practical sessions and workshops learning about new procedures. In some ways it's better that the nurses and technicians are doing those activities because they become very skilled and they do it very efficiently and they can offer a lot of efficiencies to a clinic in that regard. That means that the vet doesn't have to do those, so they can focus on what are the true acts of veterinary science.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I have a question for Dr Clarke. You mention in your submission that you would like to see a Medicare-type scheme for veterinary services. We talked a little bit about this yesterday, and I think a lot of people have a very different vision of what that would look like. Could you give me an understanding of what you think would work, how that system would work and also what benefit that would bring to the veterinary industry?

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** Firstly, I think having read the description of the Animal Justice Party and what vision they have for their Veticare, I would tend to follow that model in terms of maximally utilising veterinary nurses, maybe in an advanced veterinary nurse role and also certainly making veterinary services more accessible to those who are financially vulnerable. I believe that the Animal Justice Party talked about public hospitals as well. I would like to see, I suppose, further consultation with the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia and the Australian Veterinary Association about how that would actually work. I would certainly like to somehow see veterinary practitioners involved as well because they are already financially disadvantaged. I don't propose to have all the answers. It is something I would like to think about more, but it is something I would also like to see as a more collaborative effort and have all involved to maximise the outcomes for those that we really want to help, and that's the financially vulnerable.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I assume from what you are saying that there needs to be a consultation process because we wouldn't want to necessarily create some kind of system that created competition—

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** Exactly.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** —in a market which is already under a lot of stress from everything else we have been hearing.

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** It is, yes, and there could be really innovative ways of approaching it that we haven't quite thought about yet too.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I wanted to ask Dr Baskerville a question. We've just been handed a study that I think you have tabled. We talked quite a bit yesterday about suicide and the suicide rates of vets. Is that similar for vet nurses as well, and can you tell us a little bit about that? Some of the context we were given yesterday was also the access to euthanasia drugs as being a concern in the veterinary industry—not necessarily a concern that they have it, but that that certainly creates a pathway to allow for suicide. Can you talk us through the veterinary nurses' suicide rate, the causes of that and also where access and other issues come into play?

**COURTNEY BASKERVILLE:** Yes. The paper that I've provided is a study from the US, where they have investigated suicide in both veterinary professionals—so vet techs as well as veterinarians—but also other veterinary assistants and receptionists, so basically the full spectrum of the veterinary clinic. What they've identified is that, unfortunately, vet techs too are also taking their own lives. What I think I wanted to highlight with this paper is that, whilst the issues are probably similar in that we have the similar constraints and I'm sure you would have heard, I guess, the tension sometimes with the community and those sorts of things are certainly impacting on us as well, but there is now—this paper is suggesting that because we have no professional autonomy

and because we are usually making less money working as nurses, we might be actually more vulnerable to suicide and burnout and mental ill health than other professionals in the space.

That study identified that it was predominantly overdosing on opioids, which is a little bit different. I think this study identified that male veterinarians were more likely than female veterinarians to commit suicide. This study is showing that female veterinary technicians are more likely than male veterinary technicians to, unfortunately, suicide. What they're suggesting is that they're not actually sure where or how people have accessed the opioids, but I think it's just important to note that the veterinary nurses and technicians are burning out as well and, unfortunately, we have very little research in this space to really follow up what's happening within Australia.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Thank you. Just one last question, and I will throw this out to any one of you. Obviously, we have talked a lot about, and in your submissions you talk a lot about, formalising the registrations of vet nurses and technicians, and the formal registration licensing system and a review of the veterinary legislation in New South Wales with regard to that. Obviously, the Committee will make recommendations at the end of this inquiry. Could I get a bit of an understanding of how important all of that is in improving the current situation with the vet shortage, essentially to create evidence for that recommendation?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** I think, obviously, our priority is around utilisation of veterinary nurses and technicians more, to help our vets, and registration and regulation hits a number of specific challenges that nurses and techs are facing right now that I don't think could be improved without it. A lot of that is around utilisation, so getting clearer guidelines within legislation to allow them to do more and recognising some of the higher degree programs as well. With regulation and registration, I also imagine that there will come increased remuneration, which has been a chronic issue for attrition rates in veterinary nurses and technicians historically, because they are so low paid that most of them will not stay in the profession for very long or in the industry for very long.

Then the lack of career pathways is another very strong reason why people are leaving the industry after a number of years. Also the fact that we don't have a national group to get data from. It's really hard. We often are only running off survey data, and survey data is alarming in that many staff who are currently working in veterinary nursing and technician roles are saying that they may not be in the industry in five years' time. That was quite a significant percentage. So that concerns me—that you lose so much historical knowledge and support of up-and-coming veterinary nurses and techs as well—because it's those nurses and technicians who have been there for five, 10, 20 years who are training, supporting and developing the new graduates. Without them, it means there's a lack of support mechanism, which also contributes to those new graduates leaving after a number of years.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I have two questions. One is probably to all of you and then one is probably a bit more related to Dr Clarke and your submission. But just picking up the issue around the regulation—and I think everything that you all said in your opening statements I completely agree with—I think, particularly the vet nurses and the vet technicians, tapping into your expertise and how we can use that to manage workload just seems to me like a really obvious theme that's coming through the inquiry. It's good when there's consistency. I know, Mr Fitzgerald, you talked about wanting to have a national scheme to regulate. In the ideal world, that would be what we would do. But obviously being a State Parliament, do you think there's merit in us looking at what we can do at a New South Wales level to begin with? I know you referenced WA has some sort of model set up. How could we as a State committee recommend something that maybe we could do, even as a jurisdiction of New South Wales, that would make a difference, and maybe start that pathway to a national registration program?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** I think it's likely going to start with the States. My hope was that each State may, over time, review their legislation and make changes. The hope is that we might have a program similar to AVNAT, that could be under a regulatory body, that could make standardised recommendations to State-based legislation change ongoing, so that as each State reviews their legislation they could potentially take this portion of legislation and put it into their State as well. The only concern about State based is that there are already some State discrepancies and it's really hard for a nurse or tech to move between States. In theory, they could be performing a duty in their work that was illegal in one State and legal in another, so it would be good to standardise that. But I think it will come with States first. I'm hoping we can create something that could just be picked up by each State and put into their legislation.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do either of you want to comment on that?

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** I agree with Gary.

**COURTNAY BASKERVILLE:** I think that it probably will likely start with State legislation and registration but, yes, somebody has to make the move.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just going on to the issue of the universities that offer both the Bachelor of Veterinary Technology and also veterinary nursing—because we've got some university representatives coming later today—it was interesting in reading your submission, Dr Clarke, that I think it's only Charles Sturt in New South Wales that offers the bachelor—

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** A Bachelor of Veterinary Technology, yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** And then it's only in Melbourne that you can do the Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing. Why do you think that is? Again, is that another area that we could be looking at? Obviously it takes a long time to train the professionals that you need at all levels, but in terms of workforce and support, why is it not being offered in more universities? Do you think that's something we could look to improve? And then there is also the issue around a micro-credential, which I think was raised in a few of the submissions as well. Is there something in that space that needs a bit of work that would help with your pipeline coming through of those paraprofessionals, for lack of a better term?

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** I think, definitely, an increase in the number of degree-qualified paraprofessionals is to the advantage of the veterinary workforce and to the Australian community. I think the ones that I mentioned, other than the Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing in Melbourne, are affiliated with vet schools. You've probably heard a lot through this hearing about the issues that the universities and veterinary schools are dealing with, so the funding issues would be another thing that's impacting on this. I would hope, again, that we could get more government support to increase the number of veterinary technology and veterinary nursing graduates who are being trained at universities, for sure, yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How do the micro-credentials play into that? If you're currently qualified and you want to do more to upskill—and I agree with you about having that other level that you can aspire to.

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** Yes, an advanced nurse level.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's the missing gap, as far as I'm concerned. How does that work in practice? If you're working at a vet practice in Gunnedah, where I live, and you want to upskill, what are your options now?

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** Gary might like to talk about the veterinary technician specialisation.

**GARY FITZGERALD:** There are a couple of different options. There are some diplomas in certain niche areas that you could go into. Then there is a currently a North American qualification, which is called a veterinary technician specialisation and it is a very high-level qualification. It is run through the American colleges. For instance, I am a vet tech specialist in exotic companion pets. To go through that process—for me it was—you have to work in your area of expertise for about five years, typically. During that five years you have been doing a significant amount of continuing professional development at a very advanced level, often specifically offered by other specialists. Then you submit an application. Your application is a series of case logs—cases that you have worked on. Each of those case logs has to be aligned with specific clinical skills that you master. Then you do case reports. You submit all of that as a whole application, and you get accepted or declined to sit a final exam. Then you sit a final exam. If you pass then you become a specialist of VTS (Veterinary Technician Specialist).

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is that recognised here, even though you do it overseas?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** It's not specifically recognised. I would consider it internationally accepted, but it's certainly not recognised in an award or in legislation. But it is an extremely high level of expertise. Everyone in Australia—because we have a national qualification, anyone who has a vet tech degree or a Cert IV could apply for that and go through that process.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's useful. Thank you.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Following on from the questions asked earlier by the Hon. Emma Hurst and the Hon. Sarah Mitchell, you're all advocating for regulation and registration. At the moment I understand it's only Western Australia that has that in legislation. Queensland has a definition. I know the AVBC has a model for how that should happen, but I wanted to know, if we were to make a recommendation, is there a particular model that you would suggest should be adopted in New South Wales? Does Western Australia work or does it have issues with it? What's your preferred view of how that should happen? I am happy for you to take it on notice.

**GARY FITZGERALD:** Yes, certainly I would like to be able to offer further detail on notice. We recently met with the AVBC boards to workshop regulation and registration of veterinary nurses, and we did

discuss the Western Australia model. It certainly could work, and it could be one that could be adopted amongst the States. I don't want to speak something that might be false, but they are certainly developing it in the right direction. My preference would be to move to a national program, utilising something like AVNAT or similar.

**COURTNAY BASKERVILLE:** I agree with that.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you all for your submissions and for coming along today. Dr Clarke, when you were making your opening comments, I think I was correct in hearing that the commencement of the work, in terms of Australians trying to develop the formal structure and qualification, goes back some time. I think you actually said about 2003, so it's been something that's been going on for a while. These things can move quite glacially, can't they, in terms of trying to take an idea and move it forward to ultimately a national structure or national framework where there's comity and agreement between the States and Territories?

I'm just wondering has there been thinking done, beyond the frustration of it not happening quickly enough, about the reasons why there seems to be such slow progress? These things obviously don't happen overnight. We've got six States, two Territories, the Commonwealth and all that goes with that—living in a federation, working in a federation. Do you have any thoughts about what is the reason why it's slow progress, and what can be done to accelerate what perhaps appears to us around the table—I don't speak for my colleagues—something that should be done, and perhaps a degree of surprise that it hasn't been done to this point?

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** Could I clarify you're talking about registration and regulation of vet nurses?

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Yes, but also, as we go through the valuable submissions, the differences in the courses, or not the courses, as the case may be. The unification which you often find in industries doesn't appear to be here. I'm just wondering whether there's thought been given to why that is so, and what can be done to tackle that?

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** I've actually given the Committee a copy of an article published in the United Kingdom. It's talking about the transition from the vet to the vet team. I think historically that article actually explains a lot. A lot of what happened is also very typical of what happens in female-dominated professions, for some reason. Also, with veterinary nurses—and this is not being disrespectful; this is documented in the literature across the professions—basically we've got a situation where we've got a dominant-subordinate relationship, the same as the medical profession with human nursing. One of the leaders of the bachelor degree for vet nurses in the UK has said, and it's very true, that whenever you've got that situation with that dominant-subordinate relationship, there's always quite a struggle for professionalisation. Human nursing had the same struggle. If you read through their history, it's really—

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Training on the wards as opposed to training in the university.

**PATRICIA CLARKE:** It's very much the same. Also, if you look at the dental health therapists and hygienists and the physiotherapists and occupational therapists—because I've done a lot of reading in that area for my PhD thesis—it's very typical that this happens. So I'm hoping that the article that I've given you will explain a bit more of that. I think also the vet nurses and vet techs have to be empowered to basically put forward their own arguments, and education has given them that power. I think university education plays a vital role in that particular area.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Which leads me nicely onto—and perhaps you all might like to contribute to this, given your detailed background and knowledge—the Federal Fair Work Commission award, the Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award 2020. Dr Baskerville, this is referred to in an end note to your submission. Is that award in reasonably good shape, or is it an award that has been, in terms of its basic structure, there for some time, and could do with, dare I say, some serious modernisation?

**COURTNAY BASKERVILLE:** Gary might be your best bet there.

**GARY FITZGERALD:** I think it needs some serious modification, absolutely. Firstly, it doesn't recognise all the qualifications that are available. Interestingly, it often sort of ends at the final qualification of cert IV, so it doesn't really give opportunity for people remaining in the industry to develop further and then get better remuneration ongoing. But, yes, I think it needs to recognise the other qualifications and it probably needs an increase to recognise the work that they're doing in clinics.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Just out of interest, is paying above the award rate a feature of the veterinary industry or do practices, be they large corporates through to the sort of smaller single-vet structure, pay pretty much the award rate as far as you know?

**GARY FITZGERALD:** I would argue that it's pretty commonplace to pay above award—not significantly above award though. Depending on the type of clinic and its size, that often determines how much above the award they will pay. There has certainly been a move, since there have been shortages and increased workloads, to people using that to attract more people to their clinic. Anecdotally, I would argue that some of the larger corporate practices, or just larger hospitals, are often closer to the award than some of the private practices where they are now starting to pay a little bit extra to try and retain the good staff that they have, particularly in rural communities so that they don't end up moving on into the city. But I don't think that it has had even close to the effect that we have seen in veterinary pay rates that have gone up quite significantly over the last few years with this increase of workload since COVID and trying to attract people to come and help out in your clinic because they are suffering from shortages. Yes, I think there could be some work done there definitely.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I won't repeat that; I'll put it on notice.

**COURTNAY BASKERVILLE:** Could I just add to the question about the slow uptake of registration? I just wanted to highlight too that there are bigger issues in regard to our poor retention that then impact on leadership within our profession. I would argue that with age comes leadership and engagement with your profession. If we've got people who are leaving practice within five to seven years, they're not sticking around to then take on those leadership roles as well. I think that is historically something that has been happening within our profession as well.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** That's a very good point.

**The CHAIR:** That concludes our time with you today. You have agreed to take some questions on notice, so the committee secretariat will be in touch. You'll have 21 days to get back to us with those answers. Thank you very much for taking some time out of your day to provide us with valuable evidence and answer our questions.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**Professor JACQUELINE NORRIS**, Member, Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, Dean and Head of School, Sydney School of Veterinary Science, The University of Sydney, affirmed and examined

**Mr TIM PAYNE**, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects, Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President, The University of Sydney, affirmed and examined

**Dr GEOFFREY DUTTON**, Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Science and Health, Charles Sturt University, before the Committee via teleconference, sworn and examined

**Professor JON HILL**, Executive Dean, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Southern Cross University, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to today's hearing of the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales. We now hear from various witnesses from educational institutions.

**TIM PAYNE:** I am the director of policy for the University of Sydney, and I'm here to assist Professor Norris and the Committee if you have any questions about higher education policy in the context of funding for veterinary science and also with the review of higher education that's going on at the moment, the Australian Universities Accord.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** I'm Dean and Head of School of the Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney.

**JON HILL:** I am Executive Dean in the Faculty of Science and Engineering at Southern Cross University and also Dean of the soon to be created School of Veterinary Medicine.

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** I am the Associate Head of School of Veterinary Sciences in the School of Agricultural, Environmental and Veterinary Sciences at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga.

**The CHAIR:** Does anyone want to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions? Professor Norris?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** Thank you very much, Chair. I've already introduced that I'm the Head of School and Dean of the School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney, but I'm also appearing here today for the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, who also made a joint submission. As I'm sure you've heard, vets are a critical profession to Australia's and New South Wales' interests. We're responsible for safeguarding animal and human health through our knowledge and skills in biosecurity, animal production systems, working animals, animal companionship and of course wildlife. Veterinary schools have got a longstanding relationship with the departments of primary industries in each of our States—with us, the New South Wales DPI—in training of vets, research and acquisition of really important specialist skills.

Vets are a greatly underappreciated profession, while the Commonwealth Government funding model for veterinary education leaves each veterinary school in a major deficit. For example, for our school, for domestic places, there's a deficit of \$20,000 per Commonwealth-supported student per year. Obviously, meeting that shortfall requires some cross-subsidies. The University of Sydney and other veterinary schools have had some significant challenges recruiting staff, particularly for our clinical academic roles. As you would have seen in our submission from The University of Sydney—and you would have also seen it in the VSANZ group—there are quite a few recommendations, and I just want to highlight a couple of them.

The compulsory mentorship system that is based on a longstanding New Zealand model would be a very helpful introduction to our profession. Formal supervision, as occurs in many other professions, would be very valuable. Assistance in recruiting of overseas veterinarians—the visa delays at the moment are untenable. Collaboration with government departments, both State and Federal, in provision of subsidised testing and financial support for rural veterinarians, I think, is key, as well as student cadetships and the State Government advocating to national government to change the education funding model through the Australian Universities Accord review, which is underway at the moment, as you would know.

Lastly, some changes to governance or regulation—I heard you speak before about the national registration system. That's really essential for veterinarians. I think it would make a big difference in understanding our workforce, areas of shortage and areas of change. Veterinary education accreditation reform through AVBC, who I believe you're speaking with this afternoon, to allow a tracking or a semi-specialisation of veterinarians as they go through their degree would make a big difference in terms of how they go in that very first year of graduating. They probably would end up coming in at about the six-month mark rather than being the brand new graduate. Thanks so much for the opportunity to discuss these important issues with your Government.

**JON HILL:** I will make a brief statement. As a regional university, Southern Cross University is deeply embedded in our communities. We're in the Northern Rivers area and across our campuses at Lismore, Coffs Harbour and Gold Coast. That brings us close to communities and very keen to develop solutions. That's why we're here: to present ourselves as a future partner to work on the solutions. Professor Norris has outlined some of the problems, and they are very well articulated in the deans' review *Rethinking Veterinary Education*. We're an energetic and relatively new university and a new veterinary program, so we would see ourselves as being able to implement very quickly many of the solutions that are being proposed. We want to emphasise that we're a very willing partner to work with government, and we already are working with government and the TAFE and DPI sectors. Lastly, there's an unmet demand for veterinary places and also to train veterinary nurses and technicians. There's an unmet demand to train people in the veterinary team. We're very keen to be a good partner with government, with industry and with other universities to develop those solutions.

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** First I would like to thank the Committee for allowing me this opportunity to front this board via videoconference because, unfortunately, the tyranny of time and distance has got to us, and it looks like video has too. Basically, there's no doubt there is a veterinary shortage in New South Wales, especially within the rural sector. A large percentage of veterinarians are leaving rural areas, so in the short term we have a high outflow from the industry. This has a compounding effect, which needs remediation. We feel that the governments, namely State and Federal, need to work together to alleviate national crisis.

There needs to be concessions for working in the rural and remote areas and, in particular, in New South Wales. I'm sure you've heard that one way is for our DPI to offer scholarships and cadetships, with the requirement to work two to three years in the rural sector. There are many other ways concessions could be given and make rural practice more attractive for veterinarians to stay within these areas. I also invite the Committee and any other people concerned with this inquiry to come to Charles Sturt University of Wagga Wagga to see firsthand a rurally based veterinary school. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** The Committee has resolved to have a free flow of questions, so they'll come from anywhere. Obviously, Dr Dutton, I can't read your body language now as to whether you want to answer questions, so don't be embarrassed to yell out and interrupt one of us if you have something that you wanted to contribute.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you all for coming and also for your submissions. I will start with a question directed to any or all of you and going partly to, Professor Norris, what you said in your opening introduction around the funding models because it is something that we've heard over the course of the last day or so. You mentioned there's a \$20,000 shortfall per student and you've got to make that up. With the accord happening, it is very timely at the moment that we look at that. But, in practice, what does that mean for how you need to operate your schools? How do you manage that?

There were some concerns yesterday about the high number of international students who come, study and then leave. But, obviously, as a university, you've also got to keep your bottom line operating as well. Where are some of the funding challenges? If we were to make a recommendation that could be potentially forwarded on to that work happening at the moment at a national level, what would be the number one suggestion that we could make around how we can fix that funding issue to get that workforce pipeline coming through?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** Thanks very much for that question. I guess there's a few questions within that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes. Starting with the easy issue—no, I'm kidding. It's very complex, I know.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** The funding model, yes, does leave for most of our universities \$20,000 per year per student, so by the time they graduate from the DVM, which is a four-year postgraduate program, it's an \$80,000 deficit to the university. It's very similar for the other vets course. There is a cross-subsidisation from other parts of the university. Some of the costs are defrayed a little bit by having some international students. The other thing about international students, which is a little bit of a misconception, is that they come here and then they all go home. You'll see in our submission that in a survey that we do of all our students in the year after, there is about somewhere between 50 and 75 per cent who stay in Australia. For what time period, we're not entirely sure. There's a need for a national registration body where every year we register, we pay our fees, and we always have to fill in some surveys around not having a criminal record and being in a good mental health state. A small survey to understand where all vets are at would be hugely useful. I'm sorry, what was your other question?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If we were to make some recommendations that would feed into the accord process—is it more places? More funding? If we had a directive to give that group, what would it be? I'm happy for others to comment too.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** I might start and then I'll hand over to Tim, if you don't mind. I think more places in the current funding model would just put us, obviously, into greater deficit—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** More pressure.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** Yes—domestic places. Tim might be able to speak better than I to the actual way the different types of degrees are funded—medicine, dentistry and vets versus varying other degrees. One of the big areas that is the most expensive part of the degrees across all veterinary degrees is the final year. That is because of the clinical placements. So some funding models that actually addressed some of the placement costs—not only for the university but for the students as well. They end up with what's called placement poverty associated with those things. I might hand across to Tim.

**TIM PAYNE:** I can probably provide a little bit of historical policy wonk type background to the current funding system. The funding challenges that the veterinary schools face in Australia, they're not new. They've been there since Australia shifted its higher education funding. From the 1980s the Dawkins Relative Funding Model was established, and the current funding structure still really has that foundation. Since about 2010 the Federal Government has run transparent costing exercises. They started off with a small number of universities, in the context of a thing called the Base Funding Review that was around in 2010-11. That runs every year now, and that has confirmed that veterinary science, along with some other disciplines—medicine, dentistry, agriculture—are the fields where there's a gap between what universities say it costs and what the funding is. The problem for universities with the current funding model, which the Accord is looking at very carefully, are the incentives.

Universities receive, under the Commonwealth funding model, an amount from each student and an amount from the Commonwealth. For veterinary students, the Commonwealth contribution is \$28,200 per student. For the students, it's \$11,800. But what the Commonwealth also does is it caps the amount of money that it gives to each university—that is called the maximum basic grant amount. What happens there is that, as the universities enrol students from different disciplines, they consume their Commonwealth funding component up to their maximum. If you take, for example, a student doing law or economics or in the arts fields, the Commonwealth contribution is \$1,200<sup>1</sup>, so you can enrol 27 of those sorts of students with the same impact on your funding envelope. But then the student contributions are higher in those disciplines, so students in those disciplines are paying \$15,000.<sup>2</sup>

The funding incentives are all over the place and the University of Sydney, for a long time, has made the decision to cross-subsidise the veterinary school because of the critical role that school plays in the support of the State's biosecurity, agriculture and caring for animals. The school is an asset. I think we have 80 academic staff. But when it boils down to it, it's not just funded by international students who are enrolling in that course but also international students who are enrolling in other courses. Those international students are also cross-subsidising our medical students, our agriculture students and our creative and performing arts students. This is where universities become concerned about proposals to levy taxes on international students and proposals that are being thrown around in the Accord. We actually are subsidising not just the teaching but also, to a large degree, the research in the veterinary school and all other schools—in medical.

I would also say that there's a very big difference in the way the Commonwealth and States work together, say, for medical workforce in regional areas. The University of Sydney has campuses or facilities in Orange, Dubbo, Broken Hill and Lismore where students do long-form placements. We are now establishing a medical school in Dubbo. In terms of specific recommendations—and these are going through to the Accord, but a much more joined-up approach between the Commonwealth and the States in key skill priority areas like veterinary science. We have seen a recent example of this with teacher workforce shortages, where there's a national teacher workforce strategy with funding support and a whole lot of initiatives that has been agreed between the Federal and State Ministers. But veterinary science is not treated that way, and I can't really see the issues being resolved. The University of Sydney, at the moment, receives \$24 million a year to support that regional network from the Federal department of health. For students in medicine, there is medical student loading and a whole lot of arrangements to support placements in regional areas. That doesn't exist, again, for veterinary science.

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<sup>1</sup> In [correspondence](#) to the committee, received 8 September 2022, Mr Tim Payne, University of Sydney, provided a correction to their requested a correction to their evidence by replacing the number "\$1,800" with the number "\$1,200".

<sup>2</sup> In [correspondence](#) to the committee, received 8 September 2022, Mr Tim Payne, University of Sydney, provided a correction to their requested a correction to their evidence by replacing the number "\$15,500" with the number "\$15,000".

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** I concur with my colleagues there. To give you an idea, we do cross-subsidise from our other courses as well, but we are actually running a lot of other courses that are within the agriculture sector. From day one, we have heavy costs because we have a large number of herds, being equine, sheep and cattle, for our training, especially for the initial training not only of our veterinary science students but also our vet techs for handling animals and that, because we need to ensure that our students, when they do go out to their early practical work—which is on farms and in other areas—are competent in handling those. We have to run those herds, so there's a cost there—a huge cost. We do run one of our cattle at a commercial farm but the rest of them are actual teaching herds. We need staff to do that.

Furthermore, we also have a cap on our ratio of teaching numbers of students to our academics, which is capped at about a one to seven ratio, whereas other courses actually have a much higher ratio because if you think of some lecture theatres you've got hundreds and hundreds of students and we have that cap as well. That adds to our costs and our infrastructure. Of course we've got highly qualified staff so there's that cost as well, which is not, as has been elucidated, met by our government funding. In fact, it's probably only about two-thirds of that and you'll probably hear that a lot.

**JON HILL:** You asked, Ms Mitchell, what can the Government do or what can this Committee do. I'd add specifically that we see a government role in facilitating the flexibility in the regulatory environment in which we operate. What we've heard is veterinary schools have high fixed costs. How do we attack that? Part of the reason they're fixed is because of the regulatory environment, which comes back to the national approach to how veterinary education is presented. That national approach is derived from State-based boards and State-based veterinary Acts. So what we'd ask is that there is support in facilitating flexibility for veterinary schools to meet those stipulated requirements.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I wanted to ask about the admissions process for your students because, again, we heard some differing thoughts on this yesterday. My understanding is some universities look at ATAR alone, while others would look at a combination of ATAR and interview. There was a suggestion yesterday from some recently graduated vets who work in regional communities that having a regional person on the panel or a regional vet who can understand what the role might be if you're working out in Warren—where one of the vets was from yesterday—as opposed to working in Neutral Bay and the kind of aptitude for the role. A bit of clarity would be useful from each of your universities. What's your process for admission into your degrees? Has that changed over time? Is that something you would look to—probably for Southern Cross being new and going through that process, whether there's anything that you might have learnt, Professor Hill, from the more traditional ways of admitting students?

**JON HILL:** I can lead off. We don't have the admissions criteria yet but I would say we certainly are learning from our colleagues from Charles Sturt, from Sydney and from around the world. Each one of us looks to those. I do applaud the presentation from the veterinarian from Warren. I'm an ex-Narromine veterinarian and certainly can relate to that. It's having a breadth of evaluation and looking at the outcome that we want. What type of person do we want? We want a resilient person and we want someone who understands the veterinary industry and who wants to be a part of it and have a commitment to staying within the industry, as a broad aspect. It's a tough thing to select appropriately but we at Southern Cross will take the learnings from around the world, and from our colleagues, on what is a good way to select and also a practical way, and a defensible way. I'll leave my colleagues to expand.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** It's a great question, Mrs Mitchell. At Sydney we have a three-tiered system. The first one is GPA, or grade point average, WAM (weighted average mean), or whatever you like to call it. Then all those marks are taken away and that whole group of students go to a tier two committee that is made up of practitioners from urban and rural areas, and some staff members. They look at the quanta and depth of someone's experience in veterinary practice—whether they've been a veterinary nurse or a veterinary attendant or other things they've done. There's a minimum of four weeks but most of our people coming into our degree have actually done much more than that through work experience, so it speaks to their commitment and their knowledge of the industry. Then we also have what's called Casper, which is a situational judgement test.

I've only been in this role for about eight months, and I'm actually wanting to move across to additional interview system, because my commitment is to increase our rural students to up to more than 25 per cent. I recognise that just creating a place is not going to necessarily see them thrive. So working with our development office—philanthropy, within our school—and so far we've got around about 12 scholarships for students, and some are quite substantial. They're \$40,000 or \$50,000 a year for the student to live on—support systems that allow people to come from areas to actually thrive in Sydney and not be not eating. But it's definitely something that we need to look further into in terms of the interview system and how we go about that. Like John, I'm actually looking at all the other vet schools who do interviews to see what's the best approach for that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Dr Dutton, would you like to comment?

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** We have an initial system, of course. Everybody applies through our UAC et cetera, but we also have an ancillary system where we first look at, yes, academic record. That's an ATAR of 90, but of course for regional students we do give an extra credit of five, so they only need 85 initially or a GPA, if they've done university studies, of five. They then put in a submission to us, which is a written submission which has a number of factors in it. They have to show, basically, a commitment to rural or regional communities, a commitment to veterinary science, a commitment to animal production and an understanding of some of the unique factors of rural practice and things like that. They do that, first off, by showing that in their spare time they've either gone out to veterinarians, either in the country or in the city—it doesn't really matter there. But they've shown that impetus to go out in their own time and visit practices and also work in rural areas in farms and other things. Therefore, they've had that background already.

We then look at written communication. They write a letter to the head of school. They also then have a question that is topical. At this time around, this year, it was a One Health type situation and the use of antibiotics—so something that's topical within the regional areas at the time. We then select from that. To give you a couple of numbers, we get around 400 to 500 applicants. Of that, last year, we interviewed 163. So they actually come in for an interview panel. At the moment that's done via Zoom. On that panel, of course, is the chair. There is also an academic who goes through academic things and also a veterinarian that's working in practice. Most of them are rural practitioners that help us do that. Of the 163 that we interviewed, we then take in about 60 to 68 places, depending on what we find. So we've gone through those rigours. We're basically seeing that they're almost ready to be in rural areas or they've come from rural areas, and they have that impetus and that want to help the rural sector in that respect.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you. That is really useful.

**The CHAIR:** Can I fire off a few questions? Picking up on what Ms Mitchell was talking about, can we go to the issue of burnout and rewind to the point where they are doing the degree? I want to get some baseline data from all of your universities in terms of the dropout rate from students completing the course, maybe over a period of five years. Happy for you take it on notice. To start off with, what is the dropout rate from people doing that course?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** Great question. I will take it on notice, but I actually believe it is between 1 and 3 per cent.

**JON HILL:** Can we clarify? Do you mean before they complete?

**The CHAIR:** Before they complete. How many people are actually dropping out because they realise it is not for them, they cannot handle it, it is costing too much or whatever the reasons? What is the dropout rate?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** It is less than 3 per cent. We have to report on it for our accreditation. Every veterinary school has to be accredited and it's part of that documentation. That's usually between 1 and 3 per cent, so basically only one or two students.

**The CHAIR:** More generally, in terms of burnout—I think many of you have touched on it in your submission—not to belittle the burnout rate of veterinarians, but you could draw a similar comparison to the burnout rates of primary and secondary teachers. We've been talking about that for probably the last two decades, at least since when I was a teacher. Is it a case that there's more work to be done more broadly on industry-specific work readiness? Is it that there's a shock when people leave their degree and go see how the real world works in terms of the industry and they realise they can't cope? Is it not endemic to veterinarians but a broader problem in terms of work readiness? I'm not suggesting that it all falls on the shoulders of universities to solve that problem, but is it a more broad problem that's not unique to vets?

**JON HILL:** I'd certainly agree that that's something we're all working on. It's hard to pick a person at the beginning of a veterinary course or any course: teaching, nursing, medical course. And that's what we're trying to do. So I'd suggest that the mental health aspect of a veterinary practice and preparedness for the veterinary environment, as you say, after graduation is something that we are working on as a global veterinary community. That's a high priority. The Australian Veterinary Association's working on it. What I'd suggest, though, as just one component of that is that we enable veterinary students to be embedded in the veterinary workplace from as early a time in their studies as possible so that they do know what the veterinary industry does and what they're going to contribute, even prior to joining the veterinary course if a lot of the aspect of an admissions criteria is knowledge and experience and actual hands-on experience within the veterinary environment. I do agree that that's a major component.

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** Can I answer in here too? I digress just quickly with regard to the dropouts. With our students, yes, we do have a small percentage, a few every year, that may fully drop out, but we have the exit point, which is a Bachelor of Vet Bio. Furthermore, a lot of our students will go away for a year and think about their future and things like that. We fully support for them to take an absence of leave in that respect. So when it comes to graduation we are tending to graduate around 60 students a year anyway. Some drop back in years. Others have a few years off. There's not many that really fully drop out.

To your second question there, we get ours ready, of course. We send them out to rural practices. This is a requirement of accreditation anyway to a number. A lot of them do go out to rural and more remote ones that we have as our partner practices and things like that. They see some of the things out there. Sure, they're protected, but they do see a lot of that during their training. We find that a lot of our graduates—actually, I saw a number of our graduates speaking in a number of areas—do stay within the practice. How ready they are for that—sometimes in some areas they're not ready, basically, and I call this the post-COVID hangover, for the abuse that sometimes they get from people and the misunderstanding of things and things like that. We're in a front industry where you're fronting with people who are under stress themselves with their animals and other things. It is not so much the rural guys; they understand. But with some of the smaller animals and other areas—I'm not being speciesist here; sometimes it does happen with animals—you get abused. It's something you don't really want to expect as a thing. You've had a hard day and then suddenly you're getting abused.

**The CHAIR:** I guess one of the other things that we picked up from evidence yesterday from some of the vets was that they trained to be a vet but they didn't necessarily train to be a business manager. But I could say that a lot of people that train to be something don't necessarily train to then operate their own business in that field. Is there anything within your courses that provides a bit of guidance or education on managing a practice as a sole trader or a business partner? Is that something that the courses delve into?

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** Can I answer that with respect to our course?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. I'll start with you, Mr Dutton, and then I'll pass it around.

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** Thank you very much. We run a week-long thing that's called transition to practice. During that period, some professionals come in and train them and give some business tips et cetera and some training in that respect. We also have a number of areas during our course where we do look at that. But it is one of those things that you can't fully train for. You have got professionals doing degrees doing it. Often we find that a lot of the smaller practices cope but once they get larger, they tend to—our guys, anyway, we've noticed—take on a professional manager or something like that because, all said and done, as a veterinarian, that's what you want to do. You have trained to be a veterinarian to treat animals; you don't want to be stuck in an office or whatever or worrying about staff rosters or pays and things like that. You want somebody else to do that so you can go out and do the fun stuff.

**The CHAIR:** Are there any other comments?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** If it's okay, Chair, I will go back to the previous question. We have, across all the veterinary degrees, significant work integrated learning. For example, in the Sydney degree, from about year two of the four-year degree, they are out in farm placements and also practices. The entirety of the final year is lecture-free. That's a 42-week year for them and 20 of those weeks are in external practices out there, so they actually have that kind of real experience before they get to be a veterinarian themselves. It's almost like an internship, that last year, so they should be familiar with it.

To your question around teaching of finances, certainly, in our degree, there is a dedicated unit of study in third year around veterinary practice management. There are assessment tasks across all the rotations within our 22 weeks of teaching within our teaching hospitals where the finances—not just the medical conditions or the diagnosis is addressed—and the ethics and the other things are addressed. Finally, if you look to the accreditation standards, there are nine domains of competency requested by accreditation standards of which one is financial and practice management<sup>3</sup>. Each of the degrees are held accountable that they have some financial training within the degrees themselves, which we have to report on.

**The CHAIR:** Professor Hill, we heard evidence yesterday from a very experienced veterinarian who said that setting up another university to deliver a veterinary course isn't necessarily the answer when there are concerns about the financial stability of the existing ones. How are you going to do things differently to ensure

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<sup>3</sup> In [correspondence](#) to the committee, received 28 September 2022, Professor Jacqueline Norris, University of Sydney, provided a clarification to their evidence.

that financial stability within Southern Cross University and make sure it is a financially viable model? I know that's probably a little bit daunting in front of your colleagues.

**JON HILL:** That's a key question. I would refer to the paper that the veterinary deans commissioned, which has a template for what could be done differently. That is the paper *Rethinking Veterinary Education*. It is reform—that is how we approach it—and knowing the fixed costs. We have heard some of the fixed costs of, for example, farms, animal facilities and veterinary hospitals. It is being very aware of the costs. And then there are changes happening to the regulatory environment. You will be talking to the veterinary boards council this afternoon. There are changes to our accreditation standards which do apply some level of flexibility, and that's why we are very keen on seeing that flexibility continuing to increase.

The model for veterinary training is able to be changed if you're coming in and starting up a new veterinary school, basically, now. This is reflected worldwide, where there's something in excess of 15 new veterinary schools that have been developed in the UK and North America over the past few years and the next couple of years. There is a big shift towards doing things differently and taking advantage of different opportunities. That's in a nutshell what we're proposing to do: capitalise on the new ways that we can work and the partnering that we can undertake. One specific example is to avoid fixed costs by partnering with TAFE and DPI and their facilities in our local area.

**The CHAIR:** I have one final question, Professor Norris, if you can put your veterinary schools hat on. You give over 25 recommendations in your submission and probably 12 of them I would describe as industry-led recommendations that aren't just continuing to do something but are actually something new. Why haven't these things been proposed in the past? We're hearing from some witnesses that we've known about this shortage for seven years. Others are saying we were talking about this shortage 20, 30 years ago. What have been the barriers to some of these specific recommendations in terms of starting them and getting on board with them? What has held back the various groups in pushing forward on this?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** That's a great question and I think there's probably many facets to it. If you look at the 25 recommendations, some of them are about governance, as you said. Some of them are actually about our industry itself being better advocates for itself, something that has actually not been necessarily well articulated. We certainly have greater advocacy now with VSANZ and with AVA taking a much bigger stand in advocating for veterinary science. I guess some of the other things that are partial barriers are our State by State differences, I think as Jon mentioned, the differences between the different States, even the way their veterinary boards register veterinarians, the jurisdiction they have, the requirements they have.

I don't think it's actually true that there was—in fact I got stuck on a cruise that I didn't want to go on and I had nothing in my iPad but a 300-page document reflecting the USA's workforce, this would be 10 years ago—and they were predicting at that time in the US veterinary workforce that there would be an absolute surplus, for example, in small animals and that wages would plateau and all the rest of it. It has really been something in certain sectors that is absolutely true, but across the board, this absolute global massive shortage of veterinarians is actually not something that has been known for 20 years.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Most of my questions have been asked, so I only have a few. I have a question for Professor Hill. Yesterday we heard from the Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, which I believe you have created a partnership with, that there is currently a lack of skilled vets in areas of wildlife care of larger animals like horses. Will this course be targeted so that students are able to focus on these neglected areas? Is that a focus?

**JON HILL:** It is, and each veterinary school takes on an aspect that it wants to champion. Because we are in the Northern Rivers area and have the opportunity to partner with wonderful groups like Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, we definitely want to use that opportunity to expose students to a greater depth of understanding and comfort with treating native wildlife animals. Then Dr van Mil is also associated with large marine mammals, specifically whales and dolphins, and we would also like to increase the comfort level there and we have the capacity to do that. It is giving a greater understanding to be able to treat those animals, which in a veterinary sense may not be an income-generating opportunity but you have an intrinsic love of doing that as a veterinarian, so it adds to your day enormously. We have heard that it can be difficult to work given the odd client that isn't appreciative, whereas native wildlife animals are deeply satisfying to a veterinarian, so there's a desire to do that for sure.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Yesterday we heard that there is a huge interest in people wanting to learn those skills, particularly with wildlife because there are so many species in Australia, but there was obviously concern that there was a limit in the number of career paths for somebody if they were to focus on that. Is that something that concerns you or are you looking at offering it as selective subjects on the side to add to somebody's skillset because there are not many opportunities going forward?

**JON HILL:** It is adding to the skillset and I would say that each veterinary school has this as a component of their curriculum that there is exposure to native wildlife animals, and we've done that progressively over the last 10 to 20 years. Definitely it is a skillset, so that you are feeling as a veterinarian confident when someone brings in a stranded animal that you can offer care or offer the next step if you need to refer, say to Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital, to simply do some triaging and get the animal ready to transport to an expert.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** If I could answer that from Sydney's perspective as well, we think that it's such an important part of a graduating veterinarian that we have a dedicated wildlife hospital at our Camden campus. We have two specialist wildlife veterinarians. They have a one-week rotation in final year and they have a dedicated unit of study in third year. What our clinicians help to teach the students is that it is just like a dog or cat. They apply those same principles. They know the science, really, but they are applying those principles to wildlife. Every small-animal practice and every large-animal practice receives wildlife in their practice on a day-to-day basis. So it's making sure that they can do the best for those animals and get them out into the carer system or whatever is required.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** The other space we heard a bit about, and some areas that I have read about in the submissions, was that there was a lack of preparedness for mental health through some of the university courses. I don't know how old that feedback is and what changes there have been. I know that one thing that has come up, for example, is around domestic violence and how vets deal with domestic violence as it comes through. I remember hearing from a vet that they might be the first people to find out about a domestic-violence situation. An animal might come into their care that has more than one injury at different stages of healing, and that's how they suspect that potentially there's a violent situation happening, because often an animal will come in for care before a person will reach out for help for themselves. Is there a change within the university systems to deal with that and to actually ensure that vets are prepared for that?

**JON HILL:** If I can speak from the University of Queensland perspective, there are two aspects. One is preparedness of the student, and there are aspects such as a peer-support network, where there is training and mental health within that year group and then others—you form very strong peers. That's across each university. It's done increasingly well. And then the aspect you're talking about, the veterinarian being a part of the community, that's a One Health aspect to it, where the veterinarian is contributing to the health of families. It's a severe case that you're talking about, but they are at the front line of mental health in their clients. So there's a counselling aspect to being a veterinarian, and a component that you bring up there, which is a sad component, but that's extending into other areas. And that's a stressful part of being a veterinarian, but then if you can contribute to the overall health of the community then that's satisfying as well.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** I'd say that all our degrees across Australia and New Zealand have dedicated units of study around not just the sciences but of course around wellness—as in, wellness of themselves—ethics, compassion, communication and other things. They have been introduced into all of our courses over the last decade or so to help students to actually identify when they themselves are having issues. As Jon said, there are mentoring programs within each of our veterinary schools—like, between the years—and also external veterinarians, through AVA and other mechanisms, actually mentoring our students going through. I know, at least from a Sydney perspective, there is specific mention of identifying animals who have been the subject of domestic violence and the reporting systems that are available to veterinarians through RSPCA and other things to actually highlight that. You're right: they sometimes are the first identifier of a problem at home.

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** Yes.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** And we can often tell by the type of fractures that we see.

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** Can I add too that under the new standards and our guidelines that we have been given, there is a welfare section—not only welfare of ourselves, and recognition of our colleagues and ourselves when we're having stress and all of those welfare things, but also the recognition of other signs in other people. So we have that overall reaching goal and, of course, recognising animal abuse et cetera, which does lead to family abuse et cetera as well. That is embedded, as Jacqui has said, and Jon, all within our courses.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** What proportion of the student intake in each of your schools are students that come from rural and regional areas? Do you know?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** For ours at the moment it's between about 10 and 12 per cent, but I probably need to take that on notice.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** I am happy for others to take it on notice. Do you think that contributes to some of the difficulties? A lot of the submissions have raised the issue of the difficulty of getting vets to practise in rural and regional areas. Do you think that's a contributing factor?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** For me I think it's a really important factor. I might have mentioned earlier that I actually want to take our proportion up to 25 to 30 per cent, but not just give them a place but give them the support that they need there, both financial and otherwise. So we've established some really good scholarships—for example, with St Paul's College, a residential college, and through wonderful benefactors, the Webster family foundation—to bring those things in. It's one thing to give someone a place; it's another thing to really help them thrive in an expensive city like Sydney.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** What do you think the main barrier to entry for rural and regional students is?

**JON HILL:** I might give Geoff a chance to answer.

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** I was going to say, can I answer some of that? Just dropping back, firstly, our percentages are probably higher, but I'll take the exact figures on notice. That is mainly because of the way we take our students in with a commitment and things like that. A lot of the barriers are financial. You've got to realise that the rural people coming from farms et cetera are away from home. Even our students are travelling from other States and everywhere else. They've got to find accommodation; they've got to feed themselves and things like that. There is a huge cost just to the students themselves. So it is a barrier for them to think about this as well. It's not only the entry—they get through that hurdle, of course—but it's the ongoing costs.

We have a lot of students under financial stress because of it. This is where maybe governments or scholarships could come into the fray. These days, with rents and everything else—sure, they do share houses and they're usually the cheap ones in our local areas, but that still costs. We often find that students throughout our course are running one or two different jobs. Add to that a number of other factors as they go through, some of them will drop out for a while because of financial reasons, but generally they come back because we protect them in that way and get them ways of getting income et cetera in local practices and the like. But it's an ongoing cost, and for people coming out of the rural sector, they don't have that extra money.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you all for coming today and thank you for the submissions. I direct my question to Professor Norris but I expect that Dr Dutton and Professor Hill might also like to comment. Professor Norris, I thought the last two dot points on page 16 of your submission were, in particular, quite interesting. Could I ask you to elucidate on them? They are under the heading "Changes to governance or regulation". The second-last dot point says:

- Exploration of opportunities to leverage NSW Department of Primary Industry for assistance with diagnostic testing, surveillance and advice, without cost to veterinarians and practitioners.

The last dot point says:

- Exploration of opportunities to leverage NSW Health services especially in rural and remote areas.

I'm wondering if you would be able to elucidate on those. If you need to take it on notice because you want to provide a more detailed response, that's fine, but I appreciate your thoughts on elucidating that, and perhaps also Dr Dutton and Professor Hill.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** Certainly. I will take that on notice, but I could briefly mention that previously there used to be multiple rural veterinary diagnostic centres around the State, and some of those have been centralised. I think there's quite a good discussion of that in Dr Sharanne Raidal's submission, number 204, in Appendix 1, including about having facilities where farmers, through their veterinarians, can submit whole bodies for post-mortems for sampling and have that constant surveillance. For it to be part of the financial modelling for veterinary practices in rural areas to have that kind of facility available to them would help enormously with practices in those areas but also, of course, surveillance of important emerging diseases within the community.

The second one around health services, I guess it's also tapping into some of the health services that are available, so that goes both for the students—a lot of the universities, as Tim outlined, have areas where they can stay for placement and have support for their rural placements through the health system and through the finances that come through those avenues. I guess also there are some rural areas that you probably need to tap better into some of the diagnostic services and other things that are available to them in those areas as well.

**JON HILL:** I'd just add that the regional veterinary lab model was talked about in one of those submissions. It's a wonderful model to support locally; then you can add education into that. So the US model of land-grant universities is to have a State diagnostic lab co-located with the veterinary school. There's a virtuous component of service to the rural community and service to biosecurity, and then there are the educational aspects, as well as supporting the veterinary businesses in the area. So we as universities would love to tap into the teaching opportunities that the regional laboratories did present and, in some cases, still present.

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** Basically, if you come to our campus, you will actually see what used to be a regional vet lab. It was taken over by CSU when it closed and was reconsolidated with a number of veterinary labs in the area. We run our own pathology service, but you have to realise that comes at a cost; it is not subsidised or anything and it has to run at a reasonable rate so that it covers staff et cetera and all costs. In fact, it is actually being subsidised by some of our enterprises that we also have. With that, yes, there is less surveillance now because there are less regional labs that were once DPI. I don't even know if there is one in our area, but a lot of the stuff is going to our own veterinary lab in that respect and things like that, and we're training students of course there. So it needs to be something that, if we are going to have full surveillance in the regional areas, we have to have some type of diagnostic material because there are a lot of things like exotic diseases that come in and need to be tested. You're going to lock down a farm or a whole region before you get those tests done if you don't have a regional lab within some area or something like that. You're going to have problems.

Health services is the other side of things, especially mental health. We need that support not only for practitioners but also our students that go out there. We get a lot of calls for help from our students that are out in areas that are remote. They're training and they have problems, mental health or otherwise, or other sides of things where they have to seek help from our services and not other local government services. It is something that needs to be provided. There are a lot of government services—we could go for ages on them—that could be provided in a number of different areas, be that satellite-type situations or even a more direct phone-in system, because a lot of the health lines we do have are very difficult and not personal at times. Students are hesitant to actually ring those things.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just about the vet nurses and vet technicians—I understand CSU offer a bachelor course in one of those disciplines. I think, Professor Hill, you said you might be looking at that for Southern Cross. Do you have it at the University of Sydney?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** No, we don't.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is there a reason why?

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** If you speak to the University of Queensland's dean, and Massey's dean, they will tell you it's actually, like veterinary science, a very expensive model. In the first year it's fine, but once you get to the third year, where you have all those expensive things that are in veterinary science—the small group teaching, the technical aspects that they need, that kind of intensive amount of time—that's the expensive part of the degree. I guess they're some of the issues around it. There is talk in my university about that as a possibility.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's just come up in evidence, the role of the vet nurse and the vet technician and how that could help alleviate the workload on vets, but I did notice it wasn't widely offered in New South Wales. I assumed it was cost and provision, but I was just a bit curious.

**JACQUELINE NORRIS:** They are much more qualified nurses now than they were previously.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Dr Dutton, did you want to add something?

**GEOFFREY DUTTON:** Yes, if I may. Yes, it is costly. We actually run ours. We run a spay clinic that's subsidised. Our vet technicians go into there and train there, but it is very expensive. We've got numbers and reputation, and, again, it's one course that we're having difficulty funding. It has to be funded by other courses within our university. But it is something that we respect and think is pivotal for the future of the veterinary practice, especially in rural areas. If some of these vet techs can take over some of the tasks, it would go a long way to help, especially in rural areas where you don't have a veterinarian.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, all, for your time today and your very candid submissions and conversations you've had with us. It's been really very valuable to the Committee. You have agreed to take some questions on notice. The committee secretariat will be in touch and you'll have 21 days to get back to us with the those. Once again, thank you for your time.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**Mr MARK SLATER**, Director, Animal Services Australasia, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** We now welcome our next witness. Did you want to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

**MARK SLATER:** No. I'm good to dive in, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** No worries. We'll dive in.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** I'll dive in. Mr Slater, great submission. I was reading through it. In section 7 (b) I, one of the recommendations is a simplified accreditation process. I wondered if you could elaborate on that. We heard some evidence yesterday about just how difficult it was for overseas-trained veterinarians to get accreditation in Australia and an ability to practise. Can you just take us through some of those issues as you see them?

**MARK SLATER:** There are some issues. Alleviating the pressure in the veterinary world is obviously the focus, not short-circuiting skill sets; that's for sure and certain. If an exchange program were to be set up, that would alleviate a lot of the issue. You could start to induct vets from around the globe into Australian conditions and expectations as well. That accreditation could be taken through universities and training. Sometime ago, before his untimely passing, Professor Frazer Allan and myself started discussing high-rotational fourth-year veterinarian students doing exactly that, and also casting the net wider, giving those opportunities to Australian veterinary students to go overseas at the same time as well. Ultimately, I think what we need to be able to do is have skill sets that are importable and exportable at the same time, creating a baseline of skills.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** What are the main barriers? Is it the cost of doing the test, or what else is it—recognition?

**MARK SLATER:** The training and the applicability of overseas training to Australian conditions and to meet Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW standards as well, diagnostics, the potential for mistakes if there's some sort of a language barrier as well. There's a raft of issues that are pressures as far as incoming vets are concerned.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you for coming along today. Just for my own appreciation, could you give a bit of background to Animal Services Australasia and its remit?

**MARK SLATER:** Certainly, no problems. It's a newly formed organisation. I've been in the animal space for the last six or seven years, essentially. I was formerly at one of the POCTAA agencies as the CEO. On leaving that organisation, I started working for an organisation called the Odonata Foundation but realised through my experience in the field that there's very limited emergency preparedness response and recovery being done. I started talking to the Federal Government, in particular Senator Murray Watts' office, about what could happen there and then have been through the process, bringing my skills and other skills on board for Animal Services Australasia and ramping up a pilot program as well. So new organisation, not new to the space, if I may.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you for the answer about the issue of work done in the context of a natural disaster or an emergency, and also dealing with the gaps that are created in a community that loses a vet that hitherto have had a vet. Could you provide reflections to the Committee about the mobile veterinary service? Others may have a better understanding than me, but we heard evidence yesterday of some examples of a mobile veterinary service in a van, a truck or a caravan as the case may be. But in the context of trying to deal with the shortage of vets as a way to improve the ability to deal with animal welfare, at least in the immediate or short to medium term, is there a case for enhancing and improving the mobile veterinary services that we offer in the State?

**MARK SLATER:** I think there is. I think it's a profound opportunity, in conjunction with telehealth services as well. There was a veterinary practitioners repeal in 2021 that we worked through with the Department of Primary Industries and other stakeholders, which did look at the provision of mobile services. The Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW is still working through that process. Other States in Australia do allow for it, and there are considerations for fencing and self-closing doors. I do think, as far as a mobile veterinary clinic is concerned—and I know there's some sensitivity around using the word "clinic"—that's the big opportunity, the low-hanging fruit as far as veterinary services are concerned. It could be a consolidated effort. These could be co-owned vehicles or vehicles run by a specific organisation. The Animal Welfare League are running a great service as far as their truck is concerned.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Yes, that's who we heard from yesterday.

**MARK SLATER:** It could be that there's a share arrangement or local vets in regional areas call on those types of trucks to come and support them in times of a stock welfare panel, for example, or if we don't want to see a breakout of foot-and-mouth disease or a large disease outbreak, or in terms of an emergency response as well.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you for that comment. The Animal Welfare League gave us some valuable information yesterday about the mobile service that they provide. Other than the mobile veterinary work they do, can you give any insights into whether it occurs much in this State?

**MARK SLATER:** Not in New South Wales, no. We are undertaking the building of three more trailers at this point in time which are working vestibules. I've been part of the varroa response in New South Wales as well. The idea is to do everything within these vehicles, like PCR testing, bloods and making sure that, depending on the species that you're dealing with, you have the ability to deal with that. I think it should be promoted more than what it is in New South Wales. I think there should be some pilot programs with pilot overview groups involved, similar to ethics groups, as well—I think there would be a lot to be learned out of that—and something that's specifically built to deal with large animals as well as small animals and potentially native animals at the same time.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** This is my final question. From my understanding, you made the comment about the potential sensitivity around the word "clinic".

**MARK SLATER:** Yes.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Are you able to explain what that is and why?

**MARK SLATER:** It's part of the legislation from the Veterinary Practitioners Board about being mobile, having wheels, not being classed as a clinic.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Okay. It's a definition matter.

**MARK SLATER:** I think it would probably be more for the practitioners board to comment on that.

**The CHAIR:** Before I pass to Ms Hurst, can I ask you to elaborate on your pilot program? I know you've received some Federal funding for that. For the Committee's benefit, can you outline that what that pilot program is?

**MARK SLATER:** I brought a hard copy as well, Mr Banasiak, in case you'd like to see that.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. I thought you might.

**MARK SLATER:** It pays to advertise. Rescue Australia is essentially a program for being prepared for responding to disasters and then the recovery of native animals. It's a program that we're delivering in conjunction with the Odonata Foundation. We're dealing with the Federal Government to run a three-year pilot program. We are running from a facility in Canberra, which is Mulligans Flat under the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust. We're running out of Victoria at Mount Rothwell, which is an Odonata location. We're running out of Higher Ground in Fitzroy Falls in New South Wales, and then a Zambi facility in in Dural called The Hills as well. What we're doing is a concerted effort based on sanctuary models to ensure that we can remove critically endangered native animals from harm's way before it actually occurs, based on eDNA testing and knowing where those animals are.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I know we've got a pound inquiry, but obviously for our reports we will still need some evidence on both sides. I know some of the work you've done is within pounds.

**MARK SLATER:** Yes.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** We heard evidence from one group yesterday that said that pounds aren't having difficulty accessing vets and the vet shortage wasn't affecting pounds. Is that your view as well, having worked within the pound system?

**MARK SLATER:** Could I just clarify the question, please, Ms Hurst? Is it that someone had said yesterday that pounds aren't affected by the veterinary shortage?

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** That's correct, yes.

**MARK SLATER:** I would disagree with that, especially in regional areas. My experience over the last six years is that there are a lot of pounds out there, and I've seen pounds who are under duress in terms of dealing with dangerous animals—for example, the euthanasia of these animals in a humane manner that's in compliance with the law as well. That's the tip of the iceberg.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** If a pound can't access a vet to euthanise an animal, how is that animal killed?

**MARK SLATER:** Well, we saw an issue—which wasn't illegal, but it probably does need to be tested—in Bourke some years ago, and I actually personally attended that situation. I've heard instances of pounds having to use doors in cages as crushes, animals being euthanised at length, animals being euthanised orally in the back of council vehicles as well because of lack of veterinary services at the same time.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Sorry, what do you mean by killed orally?

**MARK SLATER:** Given medication orally, squeezed into their mouth via syringe.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Okay. We have talked a little bit about some of the mental health concerns for vets. Does this transfer some of those mental health concerns to pound staff that are then crushing dogs with doors and with oral liquid?

**MARK SLATER:** I mean, a lot of council staff in those situations are sort of damned if they do and damned if they don't. If they don't take care of, let's say, for an example, a dog that has come in that may have a DDO on it and has to be euthanised—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Have a what?

**MARK SLATER:** A dangerous dog order on it, or it's an aggressive animal in general and needs to be managed. If they don't manage that animal, it can become institutionalised and it can become even harder. It could be that that animal could have been rehomed. But in those instances—without proper veterinary care, pain relief, all those sorts of things—that animal's situation is exacerbated for the negative. Then you've got staff in these local pounds and local government authorities feeling helpless, without resource, without training, not really knowing what to do, and you're getting into a cycle of these people being diminished. A lot of regional inspectors, and rangers as well, their jobs are multifaceted. They've got to look after public amenities, they've got to look after parking issues, and then they've got to look after the animals. Behind the scenes provision for service for the animals—it's feeding; it's cleaning; there's faeces clean-up; there's disease control; parvo, in a lot of these areas—is a big consideration as well. That's an intense job. Then to be looking after the welfare of animals at the end of that without veterinary support is incredibly difficult.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** You talked about a couple of these forms of euthanasia. One, I'm assuming you're saying, is like a drug overdose that the animal is given, and crushed with a door—there was something else you mentioned as well, which I'll just ask you to go into further. How common is this happening because of the veterinary shortage?

**MARK SLATER:** In places in rural New South Wales, I've had commentary from lead rangers over the last five to six years that it has been prevalent. During COVID it was even more difficult for them at the same time. It's not the want of vets for that to occur; I'll be very clear about that. But it is about a massive resourcing issue as well and some vets can't even provide basic services, even pain relief, to pounds because of how stretched they are in regional areas and the sorts of miles that they travel to provide service to private clients. There is no compulsion for a vet to be dealing with an in-pound facility either. There probably needs to be some support mechanisms for vets in that space at the same time. Working in an in-pound facility as a vet is pressure—but different pressures that they're dealing with in private practice. There needs to be training and also emotional support for vets in that space at the same time, because it can blow up between council employees and vets because of the shortage.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** There was a bill passed last year that required councils to consult with a vet before an animal is euthanised. There is one submission that is pushing against that change. With what you're saying to us now about how some of these animals are being killed, do you think that change is a good thing? Is there a risk with council workers deciding in isolation if an animal should just simply be euthanised?

**MARK SLATER:** There is. It relies on a parochial understanding of the needs of an animal, respectfully. Vets are highly trained professionals but then you've also got consideration of controlled substances in S4s and S8s. These are highly regulated substances that only vets or vet techs should be in control of. There are dispensaries in veterinary clinics for those reasons. I can't see any reason why those substances would be allowed to be freely wielded in a local government authority by an unskilled and unsupervised person.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Are animals also being shot? We've talked about drug overdose and crush cages. Are animals being shot with firearms in those pounds as well?

**MARK SLATER:** I've heard of the incident in Bourke at the time which was escalated and was looked at by the RSPCA through their POCTAA abilities. I have heard of other situations where there's been no other

option other than to euthanise the animal using a firearm—definitely because of the shortage at the same time. It probably needs to be looked at, what that looks like as far as euthanising animals and the limitation within the legislation to use a firearm. There are fairly strict licensing requirements around the use of firearms and where they're used and how they're used, from hunting to euthanasia to use in public spaces as well.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** From my understanding and from some of the vets I have spoken to, a lot of people get into veterinary science because they want to care for animals and then there is a pressure for vets to go into a pound system and essentially euthanise healthy, rehoming animals because there's an overpopulation of animals. Vets are saying, "I don't want to do that work because it's too stressful and distressing." What do we do with that situation? How do we overcome that?

**MARK SLATER:** The local government authorities have what they call a network of in-pound facilities but, from my experience, it doesn't operate as a network because the resourcing isn't there. If there's a perfectly rehoming animal in Bega and someone in Bathurst wants to have a look at it, there should be a system set up where there's either an identified transport process and all the potential new owners could meet that animal. That's a missing link. I have spoken to Camden Council. They've got a new facility that they're building and they would be interested in running a pilot program along those lines.

But I think also in conjunction with the Pet Industry Association of Australia, we've seen some very successful rehoming days through pet stores, who may be supplying or may be selling animals as well. I know the Pet Industry Association of Australia would love to be able to contribute where they can in that space at the same time. I think it's a multifaceted approach. Leaving local government authorities to operate independently of each other is where we're letting ourselves down in that space.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I've got one more question around the role that Animal Services Australasia is playing in emergencies and natural disasters. I wanted to get an idea of how much that was costing. We talked a lot yesterday about the fact that a lot of these vets weren't being paid for the work that they were doing to help out with natural disasters. I wanted to hear from you about the cost and what further work needs to be done that we can look at as a State government to plan for and fund the role of vets and animal carers generally in emergency situations, and what sort of recommendations you would like to see from this inquiry in that space.

**MARK SLATER:** For emergency response, I think there has to be a linear solution, starting with what are we prepared to do and what are we prepared to be able to do at the same time. There's some great eDNA tracking mechanisms that we can use. We also have to be fairly species specific. We have some regulatory bodies that are already doing heavy work and they're not geared up to be able to look after any species in emergency environments. Having worked in that space for six years, it's quite difficult. A recommendation to government would be running a pilot program with some overview as far as the Government is concerned, having some clearly identified KPIs involved and getting some of the POCTAA bodies involved with that as well.

Interagency relationships are of the utmost importance when it comes to emergencies. Having been on the fireground in 2019-20, and recently in Mudgee, the coordination is very difficult at a grassroots level. Interagency coordination and supporting district vets who are dealing with large stockholders, at the same time as bringing RSPCA, AWL and other care groups and wildlife groups along for the journey, is incredibly important. We have got some critically endangered animals in these spaces that are sometimes overlooked. Some training with RFS—basic identification training—would go a long way. And then you are removing the onus on the guys that are out there fighting fires at the coalface as well. A standing emergency fund of some sort with overview would be a way to go, and getting these agencies talking to each other in a roundtable manner would be a great start.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** You talked about a pilot program and a standing emergency fund. Can you give us a little bit more detail, for people who are outside of this space, as to what you mean by a pilot program? What would that emergency fund be tagged for?

**MARK SLATER:** Emergency response directly. I'm not trying to oversimplify it. The catch comes in how you define an emergency, and it's any unforeseen circumstance that doesn't have resource to manage it. You could put varroa in that space. You could put fire, you could put flood and you could put disease outbreak into that space as well. In particular, in the bushfires in Bega—we were deployed there—we were looking at local vet communities that were already under duress because of the level of work that came to the fore. They had to leave their own premises, move and go back. It's a very difficult thing to undertake.

What we need to do is clearly identify, from all of the round tables and the investigations into the fires and the floods, where did we go wrong, what are the shortcomings—there are so many notes on this—what needs to be funded, and how and where. The Federal and State governments have been working on this since 2004 with no real tangible outcome, yet summer and bushfire season is Friday—it starts in New South Wales. I'm not putting

shots across the bow, but we can do a lot better. If we unpaint the demarcation lines between the agencies and start sharing some information and clear and tangible outcomes as far as emergencies are concerned—who does what and when, similar to the RFS and police in these environments—there will be better outcomes all round.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm sorry, I missed the beginning of your contribution. I wanted to pick up on something that Emma just asked about. Going back to the questions around—I think you said crushing, Emma, and shooting. That's pretty horrific. Are you saying that's happening in pounds, in vet clinics or—

**MARK SLATER:** Not vet clinics, no.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** No. I was going to say that's very against any of the evidence we've heard.

**MARK SLATER:** No, it's not happening in vet clinics at all.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In pounds. Is that where that—

**MARK SLATER:** Yes, it has been shared with me that has happened in pounds and is happening in pounds, just because of the necessity of restraining an animal.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** And because there's no access to vets. Is this tapping into the pound inquiry a bit? I was just curious.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I was asking because my understanding is that a vet would normally come into a pound and euthanise the animals with a barbiturate overdose, but if that's not available what is happening in the pounds to euthanise the animals?

**MARK SLATER:** And/or sedate the animals. But there is cross-pollination between the impound review as well as the veterinary shortage.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** All the evidence, particularly from any of vets and the peak bodies that we've heard from, has been very focused on the welfare of animals and love of ensuring they're well cared for. I wanted to be clear about that, so thank you.

In your submission you talk about how we can potentially have better collaboration between the vet associations, the educational institutions and the animal-welfare organisations around workforce shortage. Is there anything that comes to mind that might be—one or two obvious things that, as a committee, we could recommend in that collaboration space? We've had other witnesses talk about that as well but I'd be curious, from your perspective, as to whether there is something you think we could recommend that would help in that regard?

**MARK SLATER:** I think inducting people into a veterinary state of mind when they're dealing with the day-to-day business and emergency would be invaluable because you don't know what you don't know as a welfare group and/or a rehoming group or an emergency response group. Coming to terms with understanding a vet's training, without becoming a vet, I think is critically important to us being able to support vets moving forward. I also think that that shared working knowledge should be used to educate the broader public about the strain and stress of vets and what they go through on a daily basis and what good animal welfare and husbandry looks like as well. You've got peak bodies out there that are talking about this, but vets at the coalface are talking about what good health looks like.

I think a targeted community campaign similar to one—everyone knows at 0.05, you can't drive after that—where everyone should be able to say, "I've taken my dog or my cat or my animal"—and there's many species that people consider companion animals now—"to the vet on a regular basis and I do that because it's the norm", and not waiting until their cat or their dog or their snake has lost enough weight to become a serious incident that a vet can't recover them from. It is not that vet's fault. The nature of animal ownership in Australia, if I can take a step backwards, is quite parochial at best. I think that if we can aim at, without shaming, educating people in a far more appropriate manner, it would alleviate some pressure from vets as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That came up yesterday. We had a witness from Sophie's Legacy, which is an organisation from South Australia, who said they'd run a campaign called "We're Only Human". It is about making people understand the role of vets but also encouraging them to be pleasant and kind when you come into the vet clinic—there are pressures that are happening. Some others have talked about the role of what vets are there to do, and what they're not there to do, and what your responsibilities are as a pet owner too. I do think looking at some kind of government support for an education campaign has been a consistent theme over the last day or so, so that's really useful.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** You said "parochial". Will you elucidate on the parochialism you just mentioned? Do you mean geographically or just—

**MARK SLATER:** No, the approach to animal ownership—if you start a new family or you are a new Australian—is not to go to a vet and/or someone who you're going to get an animal from and say, "Can I get"—on the whole, society doesn't go looking for the advice before they get an animal. They might ring Dad and say, "We had a labrador when we were younger. Is that the best way to go for the family now?" I think more of a research science-based approach to owning an animal is far better. It may turn out that a dog may not be the best option for you; it may be a fish. I think we have to continually revisit the fact that it's a privilege to have an animal, not a right.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have anything further you'd like to add?

**MARK SLATER:** No, I'm fine, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Committee.

**The CHAIR:** No problems at all. That concludes our time with you. I don't believe you took any questions on notice, but if you have the committee secretariat will be in touch.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**Dr STEVEN FERGUSON**, President, Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW, sworn and examined

**Dr JOHN BAGULEY**, Registrar, Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW, affirmed and examined

**Dr JULIE STROUS**, Executive Director, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, sworn and examined

**Dr MARK SIMPSON**, Immediate Past Chair, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to our next session of the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales. We now welcome witnesses from the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council and the Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW. Would anyone like to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** I can keep it very brief. Firstly, I'd like to thank you for the invitation to appear today. As you're aware, and have there, we've made a submission. I just want to summarise the recommendations there. We feel that there is a need to review the veterinary-practice legislation, given the way that our profession has evolved over the last 20 years and the legislation has not kept up and that there is a need for some amendments in the areas around complaints investigations, management of health concerns, obligations surrounding advocacy of animal welfare, after-hours requirements and the regulation of paraprofessionals. We also acknowledge that there's a need for some better data. We as a board are in the process of updating our database so that we are able to collect data in terms of the full-time-equivalent vets working in New South Wales and note that there are some issues around needing to work more closely with local government, National Parks and Wildlife, in regard to stray animals and wildlife.

**JULIE STROUS:** I'm representing the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council. I will try to keep it short. In response to the overwhelming pressures being faced by the profession, the Sustainable Practice Committee was formed by the AVBC towards the end of last year. We developed a strategic plan, which is pretty ambitious. It's to build strategic capacity. In our submission you would have read about our goals for continuing professional development, improved management of complaints, a model Act, policies on telemedicine, the use of AI et cetera, registration of veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians and perhaps most importantly—under the goal of reducing dilution and duplication of effort, increasing efficiency, building a strong evidence base for regulation—a national veterinary database.

Just to clarify a few things up-front—I've been listening in on previous sessions—a pathway for recognition of European degrees is also on that strategic plan. We've made great progress in collaborating with the European accreditation system, which is EAEVE. New South Wales has led the way in the registration of AVBC-assessed specialists whose primary degrees are not recognised in Australia and New Zealand. Its processes are being considered by other State and Territory jurisdictions. In summary overall, the role of boards and AVBC closely aligns with your role here: to protect animal welfare and public interest. We're keen to collaborate and encourage your continued leadership in facing down some of these challenges.

**The CHAIR:** We've agreed to just have free-flow questions, so I might just look to someone to fire us off. Mr Fang?

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Thank you very much for appearing today. I was present for all of yesterday. I've been following this morning's session via videoconference, so my apologies that I wasn't here in person. But I'm glad to have you here. I am glad you touched on the issue of recognition around overseas veterinary qualifications and not forcing people to undergo a rigorous retesting, re-examination of their skills. What can we do in relation to getting those people that have overseas qualifications more involved in the Australian veterinary area so that we can get their skills deployed across rural and regional New South Wales? Is there work that's happening in that space? Is there a way that we can look to streamline the process or fast-track, even, the qualifications?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** I think there are two categories of overseas graduates. We've got those that are recognised through the AVBC, having qualifications that allow immediate registration in New South Wales. That's typically UK, US, New Zealand, South Africa. Graduates from those universities, we're able to register straightaway and get working straightaway. From non-registered vet schools, there is a process, led by the AVBC, that's basically a three-step process of English language proficiency and then a multiple-choice examination. In New South Wales, once overseas graduates pass that multiple-choice examination, we've got a process to offer limited registration so they can start working under supervision in a veterinary capacity before they undertake their final clinical exam and then are able to get full registration. Processes are in place. There's been a big increase in the capacity for those exam processes over COVID in response to the workforce issues. I really thank the work the AVBC have done to increase that capacity.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Are you able to provide a little bit more insight? Is that possible?

**JULIE STROUS:** Yes. The idea of accreditation is that everyone who sees "vet" knows they've come from a school where every single graduate has reached those minimum standards. If a graduate from overseas has not been accredited by AVBC or one of its partner organisations, then we provide a pathway because there's always outstanding graduates, aren't there. But you're never sure, when you haven't seen the vet degree—you don't know it—that every graduate is going to meet those minimum standards. We can assure the Australian public that this vet, who's gone through the examination process, has met those standards. It's different in each country. But we're fortunate here that our graduates don't have to sit an exam before they go into practice, because our accreditation system is very close to the veterinary statutory bodies. So they go straight into practice.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** We heard yesterday from one of the witnesses that she was aware of people that had worked overseas for a number of decades in a streamed area of veterinary practice—it'd be, like, in the dairy industry, with cows—which is probably not as broad an education as you might have in the Australian veterinary context. I imagine that you have a much wider skills gamut when you come out of the university, having worked on small and large animals and the like. But that person, who is eminently qualified in that tight stream area and well practised, was working in a service station, I believe, because they're not recognised. Is there a way that we can acknowledge that work and then stream those people, noting that we don't do that in respect of Australian graduates and our own vets that come out of the Australian system? Is there a way that we can utilise the skills and experience that are sitting here untapped to provide more capacity within our rural and regional communities, yet also ensure that we have qualified and appropriately trained Australian vets that cover that wider gamut?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** We have limited registration in New South Wales, which Julie mentioned before. What that allows is a person with specific skills or qualifications in an area of veterinary science that is needed can be granted limited registration for a specific period. A good example of this is horse work. At this time of year I will get a number of applications from veterinarians with European qualifications who have done at least three years of horse work. They will come and work at the thoroughbred studs from the period, say, August to February. They'll fill that identified need and then they'll go back home again. If they wanted to stay, we would expect that they would carry on and sit the AVE.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Do they need to be monitored or supervised in any way? That's usually that limited—

**JOHN BAGULEY:** That's correct. They're limited in terms of the scope of practice to equine work and they're also limited in the point that they need to be supervised. We have three levels of supervision: direct, indirect and immediate. Immediate means you're standing next to the person—

**The Hon. WES FANG:** One on one.

**JOHN BAGULEY:** —which is probably a good idea, initially. Once you've seen a little bit more of their work, you can be nearby so that you're available to come fairly quickly if they needed assistance. And indirect means you just need to be available by phone or something.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Do the people who are supervising need special training or do they just need to be qualified?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** No, they just need to be qualified vets without conditions.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Right, thank you.

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** The board does have a policy on limited registration available on our website that goes through all the different categories. Another common category is for work in abattoirs. We have quite a number of vets that have limited registration, allowing them to provide that critical service. We have got a well-developed policy and, in the legislation, the ability to offer limited registration.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Strous, you mentioned in your opening statement that you developed a strategic plan just recently. I think you said that it might include some model legislation.

**JULIE STROUS:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Are you able to provide the Committee with a copy of that at all?

**JULIE STROUS:** Yes, certainly.

**The CHAIR:** I think that would help us greatly in terms of looking at what changes need to be made to the legislation. Dr Ferguson, I note that you also have a recommendation—recommendation 1—about doing a review into the legislation. You've obviously already identified some areas that you think we need to look at: complaint investigation, management of health concerns, obligations around advocacy for animal welfare, after-hours requirements and the like. Are you able to provide some more detail, even on notice, as to what we should be looking at? What are the areas of concern within those issues?

It's always good to have a review and get information from different groups of people, but if there's already a body of work that's been done—noting that we're seven years into a workforce shortage—we'd rather act quicker than slower. If we could get a jump start on some of this stuff—if you've already done a body of work—that would be great. Could you table, on notice, some more detail into those areas, what we need to be looking at specifically or what issues need to be addressed?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** We definitely can. We have engaged with the current Government and the previous Government, especially through the Department of Primary Industries, in terms of where we've seen weaknesses in the legislation. We've provided it.

**The CHAIR:** That advice has already been provided?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** What was the response back from the former Government and this Government in terms of that advice?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** My understanding at the moment is that the priority is the animal-welfare legislation and then we'll follow that in terms of review of legislation.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Did you ask about the changes to the vet trucks?

**The CHAIR:** No, I didn't.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I'll ask about it. We have heard a little bit during this inquiry about mobile vet trucks and getting those. In particular, we've heard about the veterinary shortage in regional and rural New South Wales. I'm assuming that will all be part of a review of the Veterinary Practice Act. I want to get your thoughts on that. What changes do we need to get to licences—and easy licences, rather than year-by-year licences? I know you've been doing a lot of work in this space to help with the wildlife veterinary truck and also the Animal Welfare League. I want to hear a bit more about some of the difficulties you were experiencing on your end and what recommendations we need there.

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** At the moment, our legislation specifically requires that, to provide a hospital licence to allow surgery to be performed, the licence needs to be to a premises including land. That's outlined in our legislation, which makes it impossible for us to licence a mobile hospital. There are some specific exemptions in terms of emergency situations, but we've got around that with working with those mobile hospitals to licence them on a particular site. That's the limitation there at the moment. The board has had extensive discussions and conversations around that. Especially there's probably two main issues that we've had extensive discussions around: the provision of ongoing care if a mobile surgery was to come into a town and to ensure that they are able to provide that ongoing care after surgery, probably for a period of a week to 10 days afterwards, to ensure the animal welfare associated with that; but also the sustainability of rural and regional practices.

In the ideal world, we would have a full-time service available in the communities where they're needed. Having a truck come in and, for want of a better term, taking the cream off the top—the desexings, the vaccinations, the non-urgent work—coming and doing that once or twice a year and then leaving the community without veterinary services for the other 50 weeks of the year is a concern to the board in terms of then potentially taking away from the viability of establishing a year-round clinic in that location.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** My understanding, from hearing about some of the vet trucks, is that they are to work with a veterinary clinic if there is one available and then, if there is none available, to just be in that space if it's absolutely needed. The other thing we heard a lot about was telehealth for potential follow-up for a lot of surgeries. Would you support a model like that, where, say, a vet truck was to visit an area but there was a telehealth service as a follow-up? While we're dealing with veterinary shortages—we're hearing, for example, that Parkes has no vet whatsoever, and I agree with you that ideally we would want vet practices in a lot of these places—while we're trying to work through the issues around the veterinary shortage, might some of these models help in the interim?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** Telehealth absolutely has a role in terms of triage, but in terms of dealing with post-operative complications, it's not going to be able to provide the service that's required. Where we have

licensed the RSPCA going into a community, using their community hall, the licence conditions include the ability to provide that ongoing care. That can be through the use of neighbouring vet clinics, even if they're several hundred kilometres away. But the requirement there to be able to have a vet to provide that ongoing care is needed.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So what do we do? I suppose at this point in time it becomes complicated. I understand what you are saying. I think everyone ideally agrees that we want veterinary practices right across New South Wales and we certainly want to support them. But we have got locations, as you say, several hours away, and we have heard that quite a bit in this inquiry, and at the same time we are hearing that there are pounds that do not have access to vets, so animals are being euthanised in quite cruel ways. We are hearing that animals aren't being desexed and so there are all these unwanted litters and how to deal with that issue as well. Do you have a suggestion as to how we best deal with that situation without the mobile vet trucks or the telehealth?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** I think the sustainability of the local practice is enhanced by providing financial support and logistics to those local clinics. When we are talking large regional centres like Dubbo, I think we can enhance the long-term animal-welfare outcomes and the veterinary sustainability by supporting the clinics in the town already.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** What does the Committee need to recommend for areas like Parkes, where there are no vets? I understand in Dubbo there are only two veterinary practices and long waiting lists. I agree with supporting the services that are in place now, but how do we get more services out there and support those services?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** I suspect it's about getting veterinarians out there. If you can have the veterinary staff out there to support the local clinics then they can provide those services.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Some of the recommendations we have had in this inquiry are helping with HECS debts and removing some of that for people who take regional and rural placements. We have had suggestions for placements within universities that require them to go to regional and rural areas. Do you support solutions like that to really help set up those services regionally and rurally?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** There's definitely evidence that studying at regional universities and bringing in vet students that have a rural background are more likely to stay in rural practice.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Dr Strous, you said in your submission that vet nurses and technicians have valuable skills. We have heard from them today as well. You talk about allowing them to perform more tasks can actually improve animal care and ease the work for vets. Can you provide the Committee with some idea about what additional tasks vet nurses and technicians could safely assist with, with proper accreditation?

**JULIE STROUS:** We certainly have been working on veterinary nurse registration with the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia. I would like to pass this question on to Dr Baguley, though, who has done the research on behalf of our sustainable practice committee.

**JOHN BAGULEY:** In New South Wales we have a list of restricted acts of veterinary science. Then it's a question of what the profession and what the legislators are comfortable with passing on to non-veterinarians to complete those restricted acts of veterinary science.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Do you have any suggestions for the Committee? Just to get an understanding, if we were to make a recommendation from this inquiry that vet nurses and technicians take on more activities, do you have an idea of what the parameters around that would be so that we can understand what it would entail?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** Personally, I'd say diagnosis is particularly important. I think veterinarians need to be responsible for a diagnosis. The other is around surgery. I think any procedure performed under general anaesthetic or spinal anaesthetic I suspect still needs to be performed by a veterinarian. But, having said that, I think Western Australia allows some procedures to be performed by non-veterinarians, under the supervision of a veterinarian.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So we should perhaps have a look at Western Australia and where that sits and look at a model similar to that?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** I think that would be helpful. Trish was here this morning. The curriculum that the vet techs and the vet nurses complete and the skills that they are developing through those courses, obviously that would be worthwhile looking at as well.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Yesterday and today we heard evidence from people that it's extremely difficult as a foreign trained veterinarian to have your registration recognised, the exams are costly, it's inflexible. One of the examples thrown up was that foreign trained vets that come here for a holiday may be able

to fill gaps by working for a few months, but the systems in place to recognise their qualifications and the cost of doing so are an inhibitor to getting those foreign vets working. I wanted to see if you had any comment about that or a response to it. What's your view?

**JULIE STROUS:** Yes. If you were just coming here for a holiday to consider doing the Australasian Veterinary Examination would be prohibitive. It's expensive and it really does require—

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** How much is it? For a typical foreign trained vet, what would it cost from start to finish?

**JULIE STROUS:** It's completely cost recovery. I think it's in the order of \$7,000. Louise back in the office might be—I would have to give you the exact example separately. So, yes, and it can take up to two years to complete the process. If you were just coming here for a holiday, if you were from a school that was recognised by AVBC then that would be possible.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Why are there so few schools recognised? When I look at the list, they all seem to be Britain or former British colonies. There aren't many outside that.

**JULIE STROUS:** You probably have seen the list of schools where we have either mutual recognition agreements, so South Africa would be one of those, and also increasingly the list of schools that are being accredited outside the former British colonies. I think you noted Hong Kong, South Korea—

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Mexico.

**JULIE STROUS:** —Mexico et cetera.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** The Netherlands.

**JULIE STROUS:** There are programs that are equivalent to Australian and New Zealand standards and the standard of graduates that the Australian public is used to and deserves. But we do provide a pathway—and that is the examination—for those who do need to demonstrate their knowledge.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** It just seems inconceivable to me that there are vets in countries like France and other parts of the world who wouldn't have qualifications from prominent universities recognised in Australia and they would have to go through this very expensive, time-consuming process in order to be able to work, in an environment where we seem to have a gap and nations everywhere are competing for these types of skills.

**JULIE STROUS:** That's right. We do recognise that too. Again, it's one of these items on our strategic plan that we're looking at recognising European degrees. I think we are making pretty good progress so far. We put our toe in the water, I suppose, with Dublin and how we recognise that degree. Now we have so many excellent Irish vets coming to Australia each year. We had five go through our skills assessment last year, so they are directly migrating. We are working with the European accreditation system so that we can take part in their accreditations and that might be a pathway for those vets to come and work in Australia.

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** I'd also like to note that the short-term holiday, the other potential pathway is limited registration, which equine reproduction vets—so there is another pathway there that the New South Wales board can register vets on a limited registration if they don't have qualifications that we recognise.

**JULIE STROUS:** Another point, and this is where New South Wales is a leader, is with specialist registration. It was only fairly recently that a specialist from Europe would have to sit the entire Australasian Veterinary Examination before they could register as a specialist. New South Wales has found a pathway for these people to register through AVBC, but having their specialist qualification recognised.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I wanted to go to the Veterinary Practitioners Board submission—the parts about registration and the number of vets who are leaving each year. There was data from 2022. I am happy for you to take it on notice, but I would be interested to know if that level of those vets leaving the profession or no longer being registered has been fairly consistent. I think it's interesting that a lot were moving interstate or overseas, as opposed to actually leaving the profession, based on the data that you've got.

If there is any past data for the last few years that might be able to be provided on notice, that would be handy. But also, from that, if you could outline to the Committee, if you're working as a vet and you take some time off to have children—which, again, is something that has come up a bit, about an increased female workforce—what are the requirements to come back in and to be re-registered if you leave for whatever reason? And if you're not practising for a certain period of time, are there requirements to then be able to come back on and be registered?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** Yes, we're happy to provide that data. I'd say, off the top of my head, it would be fairly consistent each year in terms of the numbers. In terms of taking leave from practice, we have a policy on returning to practice, which really centres around the continuing professional development requirements for veterinarians. That currently is a three-year cycle, which requires you, over that three-year period, to basically do 60 hours of CPD.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Each year, or over the three years?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** No, over the three-year period, so 20 a year. It's divided into structured and unstructured points, which I probably won't go into, but at the end of the day what that veterinarian would do, depending on how long they've been away from practice for, is that they would need to make up that period that they are missing in terms of their continuing professional development. So if they've been off for three years, they'd be expected to do those 60 points before they come back again. If it's beyond three years, it's normally a question of doing the 60 points and then making a commitment to doing another 60 points in that first year, and then going back into a normal cycle.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Say if you moved interstate, but were working as a vet, and then you were coming back to New South Wales, is it a simple process to get yourself registered? Is there a cost involved?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** You just restore yourself to the register in New South Wales, which is the registration fee. There is no CPD requirement because the expectation is that you would have met the CPD requirements in the other jurisdiction, whether that be in Australia or overseas.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Are they consistent around Australia—the CPD requirements?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** The CPD requirements were developed by the AVA and the AVBC, but that was well over 20 years ago, so it's time for a review of those.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The reason for my question is that, not in this inquiry, but in others, particularly looking at health and other disciplines, sometimes if you leave the profession for a period of time it can be quite difficult to come back in. But it doesn't sound like that's the case for vets, as long as you do those hours.

**JOHN BAGULEY:** No.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** In regard to the Veterinary Practitioners Board submission—and thank you; it's a very helpful submission—page 1 of the submission itself has the introduction and terms of reference, and then we go over the page to the top of the next page, the first full paragraph at the top, and down the bottom it says "page 4 of 12", so it's the second full paragraph. I will just read it:

Based on the above analysis, it is likely that the average annual increase in the total numbers of veterinarians in NSW over the same period—

and that period is 2019-2022—

would have been more than sufficient to address changes in demand for companion animal veterinary services—

but for the COVID spike. I am trying to square that statement with what's been a constant theme that's come through virtually all of the witnesses yesterday and in virtually all the submissions. I will use a word—there is an acute shortage of vets; there is a serious shortage of vets in New South Wales. I am trying to square the two. I am not saying what you're saying is invalid, but is there a reconciliation somehow that I'm failing to pick up here?

There is an overarching theme and narrative that there is a very serious, acute or major—whatever word you might like to use—shortage of vets in New South Wales and the services that they provide, but then, on the numbers—if you go back to the previous page, which is page 3 of 12, just two paragraphs after the terms of reference, it says:

The number of veterinarians in NSW as at 30 June 2022 was 4,396 and this total number of veterinarians has been increasing by approximately 3% per annum from—

what is quite a long period, from 2007 to 2022, with what I guess is a compounding increase of 56 per cent. Can you help to elucidate—are these two positions that are being presented reconcilable, or is there something missing here somewhere?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** We believe that, on the basis of that data, what is missing is full-time equivalent veterinarians. All we have is absolute numbers, but we don't know how many hours a week those veterinarians are working. I suppose that's what we are looking for: If we can collect that full-time equivalent data as well, then that would probably give us a much better idea and align our data with the reality of what you've just mentioned in terms of the acute shortage.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Indeed, that makes perfect sense to me. If you go back to page 4 of 12, and then you count up three paragraphs from the bottom, we are talking about the last line of that third-last paragraph from the bottom—actually, I will read the full sentence that starts in the line above:

Consequently, as these veterinarians leave the profession, the number of veterinarians required to replace them is often more than one FTE.

There is a similar issue in areas of education, for example, where this is a well-rehearsed scenario of the baby boomer generation getting to its point and retiring and leaving. So that's occurring. The need to replace for more than one—is that reflective of the ones leaving obviously have a working life, a profession and experience, so therefore even one for one doesn't really deal with the workload that such a person is able to carry? You've actually got to be bringing in numbers to deal with those retirees, which are really above the one anyway.

**JOHN BAGULEY:** It's a good point and it probably works both ways, I would say. There is certainly that element of experience and skill that would maybe make their work more efficient than a new graduate veterinarian, but also there is the simple fact that many of those older veterinarians I am sure work more than a 40-hour week.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Which comes back to this point about the part-time work. Are there any back-of-a-coaster calculations or is there a sense of the numbers of vets working on a part-time basis? I'm not going to hold you to a specific number, but there must be a general sense.

**JOHN BAGULEY:** The best data we've got is from the Australian Veterinary Association, from its survey, which tells us it's something like 25 per cent to 30 per cent. But it is a survey. The board data is census data, if you like, but the AVA data is survey data. The other area we can look at is the Graduate Outcomes Survey data, from the universities. Again, that's looking like around about 25 per cent of new graduates choosing to work part time as well. So it's probably around that number. The difficulty is that we don't know what that number was 20 years ago as well.

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** Anecdotally, as an employer—we run four clinics in outer south-west Sydney—we've got a ballpark of 16 vets on our books. There are three or four of them who are working full-time hours.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Wow.

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** Through COVID a lot of them decreased their hours. We are finding that they are increasing their hours again now. We've had one recently convert from part time back to full-time hours.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** My final question, and both organisations can speak to this—it's a bit of crystal-ball gazing. In terms of the COVID spike that we've seen, and it is well understood, are those increases in companion animals—the numbers, or the percentage-terms increase, which has obviously come up to a number—likely to be sustained, or is there a sense that that was a spike and there is going to be a return to a more, dare I say, normal level of companion animal ownership? Just out of interest, is there any speculation about that?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** I'm comfortable it was a spike—a huge increase in demand. Dog and cat prices went through the roof. It was not unheard of, people spending \$10,000 on a puppy. We're definitely hearing breeders now saying they can't give away puppies. We went from the pounds, through that COVID spike, being close to empty to pounds being over capacity at the moment and not able to accept animals from vets.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Really? So at least some of them are almost at an overflow status?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** They are past overflow. They're literally not willing or able to come and pick up a stray animal from the clinic.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** What does that mean in practice then? If they are at this complete overflow level, what does happen then with respect to reports of a stray dog or a stray cat or whatever the case may be? Does that just go unattended because it can't be accommodated?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** In our clinic we'll go to the highest extent we can to try to reunite that animal through scanning microchips and whatever else we need to do. But then, when push comes to shove, we need to transport that animal ourselves at our cost down to the pound where they're obliged to accept it.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Sorry, just clarify that. The pounds are obliged to accept it?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** If it's presented to them, they are.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** By a vet?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** By anybody, I believe. Cats are a little bit more complicated. Some councils are much more proactive and easier to work with than other councils.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you. That's helpful.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** Thank you very much for your submissions and for coming along. I wanted to ask a question about that CPD requirement. I know that in the briefing that we had we heard a little bit about the financial burden of that as well. When you're talking about making up those hours, what sorts of courses are available and how much would the average course be?

**STEVEN FERGUSON:** With the onset of COVID, we actually reduced our requirements, where a webinar would be counted as a structured point. We haven't gone back on that at this stage. There are three webinars available, all at minimal cost, through a whole lot of providers. Yes, going to a conference can be expensive. You could spend several thousand dollars in conference registration fees for a week-long conference and get a lot out of that. But to meet the minimum requirements is, in my opinion, not financially onerous.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** So there are plenty of free programs as well. Presumably, those programs get accredited. How many of them are run by commercial providers? I'm particularly interested in whether there's a percentage of those that are being run by pet-food companies or something along those lines to try to get people in a bit cheaper. Is that an issue?

**JOHN BAGULEY:** There's no accreditation requirement for CPD. It's the market choice, I suppose, depending on how they value the CPD. The requirement for structured points is actually only five hours a year—15 hours over three years. I couldn't tell you percentages offered by different groups. Possibly the AVA might be able to help you there because they sort of accredit CPD programs, but I'll leave that one for the AVA.

**The CHAIR:** In this final minute, can I ask you to take on notice to provide the Committee some more detail on the overseas assessment process. I know you've said it's \$7,000 and takes two years, but I've looked at your detailed flow chart on your website and all I see is an English assessment test and two examinations—one preliminary, one clinical. So I'm curious as to how three tests take two years to administer. I'm sure there's a reason why, but some more detail about why it's taking two years to get through that would be really interesting.

**JULIE STROUS:** Sure.

**The CHAIR:** I believe you have taken some questions on notice, including that last one—as a reminder to myself. The committee secretariat will be in touch, and you'll have 21 days to get back to us. Once again, thank you very much for appearing today and providing evidence. It has been invaluable. We appreciate that.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**Dr ZACHARY LEDERHOSE**, NSW Division President, Australian Veterinary Association, affirmed and examined

**Dr CRISTY SECOMBE**, Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs, Australian Veterinary Association, sworn and examined

**Dr ROBYN WHITAKER**, Senior Advocacy Officer, Australian Veterinary Association, and Founding Director, Veterinary and Community Care, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to our next session. We now have witnesses from the Australian Veterinary Association, including one witness via videoconference.

**ROBYN WHITAKER:** I am appearing today as the subject matter expert for veterinary social work.

**The CHAIR:** Would anyone like to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I'll make one on behalf of the group. We'd like to begin by thanking the Parliament for establishing the inquiry and the Committee for the opportunity to contribute through both our submission and having us here today. I'm the Australian Veterinary Association NSW Division president. I also own and run a companion-animal practice in Goulburn in New South Wales just down the road. I'm joined today by Dr Secombe, who is the AVA's head of veterinary and public affairs, and Dr Whitaker, who is the founding director of Veterinary and Community Care and, as requested by the Committee to have along today, is a subject matter expert in the emerging field of veterinary social work.

The Australian Veterinary Association is the peak national organisation that represents vets in Australia. Our members come from all fields of practice. Much has been said during this inquiry about the integral part that animals play in our society, and the role that vets play in safeguarding animal welfare and public health has been shown to be indisputable. Vets facilitate the social licence that allows the community to feel comfortable with owning animals, farming animals and enjoying entertainment that involves them. As vets, we feel it's a great privilege to hold this position and to care for our patients, but with that comes a great responsibility too.

We believe that every animal that interacts with humans should have the right to access vet support. Sadly, we're falling short. This deficiency isn't just to the detriment of our animals; it undermines biosecurity, risks human health and chips away at the fabric of society. Over the past two days you've gained an insight by hearing from a range of people across the profession. It's clear there's a shadow that looms over the profession in New South Wales, nationally and globally. Vets are facing unprecedented challenges, like workforce shortages, burnout, poor mental health and financial obstacles that, frankly, would shock most Australians. In some sectors of the profession, the demand for vet services has grown at an unexpected rate, and meeting that demand has been a challenge, whereas in other areas demand has declined, and the loss of expertise associated with this reduced demand is at a critical point.

The challenges of maintaining a sustainable vet workforce are diverse. Financial vulnerabilities lead to chronic underinvestment in the labour component of vet practice and there's been a continued contraction in public sector veterinary services. Alongside this, the workforce is not immune from generational shifts and societal changes. In addition, there are the pressures of providing after-hours services, navigating a dated regulatory framework—as we just heard—and providing veterinary care over large geographical areas. Furthermore, as we've also heard, vets are performing a huge amount of public good, such as biosurveillance and caring for stray animals, injured wildlife and animals in emergencies. The cost of delivery of these services is often unable to be recouped. This is particularly challenging for the private vet sector and is one of the factors that mean that the "public good" parts of the profession don't function as a free market.

The AVA in its submission has laid out 16 recommendations, which range from immediate interventions to long-term strategic solutions. These recommendations serve as a blueprint for change, and they're grounded in thorough research and a profound understanding of the nuances of the vet profession. Each recommendation serves to highlight a path forward to fortify the workforce, and a New South Wales Government commitment to implementing these would not only safeguard the profession but ensure that it thrives, hence meeting society's evolving animal-welfare needs.

In closing, we're at a critical juncture. The challenges faced by our profession are multifaceted and so are the solutions. With collective will, strategic thinking and targeted interventions, we can pave the way for a future where both our animals and the vet teams that care for them not only survive but flourish. Thanks again for having us. With the permission of the Chair, we've circulated some handouts that summarise our submission and also provide information about veterinary social work, provided by Dr Whitaker.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** I want to pick up on the question I was asking before about the CPD requirements. Is any element of that CPD requirement causing financial pressure? What are your views on that?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** Sure, I'll take that one, if you don't mind. Continuing professional education costs money for people to undertake, it costs money to deliver and it can be a variable cost. There can be some low-cost options that people can utilise, but there is also a full range, a spectrum, in terms of the fact that some of the courses that can be undertaken can be at a relatively large cost to the individual. Examples of that would be university degrees et cetera that add to your body of knowledge. In terms of the amount veterinarians would spend, that is very variable. It depends on your own personal interest and what you want to achieve as a veterinarian. In most cases that cost comes to the private individual or private veterinarian. Some parts of it may be covered by your employer, but that can be the exception, not necessarily the rule. However, the time off to undertake that is often given to you by your employer, so they bear that cost. But I guess the bottom line is that, in order for us to maintain our standards, we need to undergo continual learning, and it comes at a cost to the individual to do that.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** Does that then encourage pet food suppliers and other people to come in and provide those sorts of training opportunities? Do you have any idea of what percentage of training is undertaken with companies of that nature providing the training?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** The usual mechanism is that bodies will undertake CPD. For example, the Australian Veterinary Association—we do a large proportion of continuing professional education, and we partner with sponsors in order for us to help deliver that. We have a degree of separation, though, in terms of the fact that that sponsorship is independent of content, as a general rule, to make sure that there are no biases et cetera, and then the money that comes from that CPD is funded back into the organisation for advocacy et cetera. There are also the private commercial CPD providers, where it's a business model where they're providing CPD for profit for themselves because they're acting as a small business. In regard to large pet food companies, pharma companies et cetera doing CPD, yes, they do do CPD as well. It may be more targeted to their areas of interest and they may run that at no cost to the people undertaking it.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** One of the things that's come out from the submissions is that we have a largely private business model of vet practice now. One of the submissions I was reading was saying that as far back as the sixties we had up to half of all vets being in a government practice. Is there any desire for government to step in and start running government-owned practices? Is that something the industry wants?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** We now have a highly developed private veterinary market that has invested a large amount in infrastructure et cetera, so it is support of that private market that is going to be the most beneficial, as opposed to the Government setting up another infrastructure form as well. Investing in the private sector market to help them deliver that public good and allow them to recoup the costs associated with that public good is likely to benefit the veterinary profession as a whole because historically we've morphed into predominantly a private market.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** If I could add to that, in our submission we do call for increased public funding for vet services. But those vet services are not what most people think of when they think of going to the vet—taking their dog in for a vaccination or having a range of services, and we've heard about the spectrum of care over the last few days. But looking at government services to plug the holes to provide a public good—this is support for animal industries, support for animal welfare and making sure that we are fulfilling our obligations to our trading partners and things like that. Because not only do we have vets scattered across the State but we also have public vet laboratories which could rapidly respond to disease investigations. Private vets could use those facilities, but at the moment those facilities are understaffed. In our submission we talk about the lack of vet pathologists. That's a critical part that the fluctuating private demand for vet services—especially in regional areas, with the price of stock and things like that—doesn't support, but we need it there as a matter of public good.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** When we talk about the numbers of pro bono hours being spent looking after wildlife or providing basic services to people on a pro bono or a cheaper basis based on their socio-economic status, is there an opportunity for government to come in and set up or provide those services directly for that kind of work, or would the industry prefer more of a subsidising model to enable existing vet practices to more adequately cope with that type of work?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** I think we would prefer the utilisation of the private system and support for that, particularly talking about that financially vulnerable group in the presentation this morning from the Cat Protection Society, in terms of working with those private practices to be able to deliver that care, rather than setting up additional facilities that then also compete—I guess that is one way to look at it—with private veterinary businesses, which we've also just heard about in the previous presentations. This is where we can sort of segue into veterinary social work. Utilising the private practices and then partnering with some support in how we

actually help those people and really make sure they're having their needs met and their animals' needs met, would be the best ideal outcome.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you so much for your submission. I think I speak on behalf of the whole Committee when I say it is really thorough and has really good recommendations that we've also been asking other witnesses about. We appreciate the effort that you've gone to. I want to pick up firstly on the issue of government veterinarians. You talk in recommendation 2 about having a review and developing a proactive strategy. I think it would be useful to get on the record, from your perspective, particularly around things like identifying whether it's foot-and-mouth or lumpy skin or a lot of the different diseases that can come in and those biosecurity threats, what the actual risk is in terms of animal welfare but also more broadly to the economy and the Australian ag industry in general if you don't have that government vet workforce complementing the private vet. What's the risk to government if that's not done well?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** It's a major risk to our biosecurity and food security by not having a really strong government veterinary sector. When we talk about the profession, we're talking about the private veterinary sector and the public veterinary sector. That erosion of the public veterinary sector has occurred over a long period of time and relied on the private veterinary sector to pick it up, and it now no longer can. It just increases our risk level around particularly biosecurity, food security but also animal welfare, which is becoming exceptionally important around our social licence to operate animal-related industries. Having partnerships between government vets and private veterinary practices is the ideal that we would like to see. To Zach's point earlier, in terms of government investment in specific infrastructure et cetera, investment in public laboratories for the whole profession to use would be really fantastic to see again. We used to have that, and it has now eroded away.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** If I could make an additional comment, it's also about incentives. In a small town, if you're the country vet who treats livestock and you have to go onto a property and you have to shut that property down and quarantine it but they're quite a big client of yours that pays a substantial amount to subsidising your rent, your staff and your costs, there is an inherent conflict there. At the moment, the government vets that are doing that cop a heck of a lot of abuse if they're at risk of shutting down a farm, but they're a government entity and that's what they need to do. But as the Government contracts out to private vets to do that work, we're inherently less efficient. In addition to that, it's also the passive biosurveillance. The more vets are out on farms, the more likely they're going to see that cow or "Hang on, that sheep is not walking right. Let's have a look at it", whereas a farmer with a low-value animal, like a sheep, might not call the vet out about that particular individual, which could be the first case of a new disease.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** We heard that yesterday in terms of the importance, in particular, of having vets on farm and why that's important. That kind of segues a bit into—you were talking about being abused for shutting down a farm—the wellness initiative that you mentioned; I think Thrive is the campaign. We had some evidence yesterday from Sophie's Legacy out of South Australia. They were running a similar campaign, which was along the lines of We're Only Human and wanting people to be respectful to their vet and really understand what happens in a vet practice. Could you tell us a little bit more about what's in your suggested wellness initiative? I know you've done a lot of surveying and research within your profession. Funding a campaign is something that we've talked about, but what else could we be doing or government be supporting you with, with that wellness initiative?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** We've spoken about our wellness initiative in our pre-budget submissions as well to the Federal Government. In terms of what we would like to see, we would like to see mentoring across the profession. The AVA provides a mentoring service for AVA members and graduates, but it would be great to have funding across the whole profession so we can progress that. We would like to see 24/7 counselling for veterinarians in need, like other professions have. That also takes significant resourcing. We have that for members, but having it across the whole profession would be very helpful.

We have just put into place a program looking at developing improved work culture as a pilot program. Extending that out to the whole profession is another desire we have, as well as increased access to a range of programs that the AVA has developed, such as Employer of Choice—so people can look at who they want to work for et cetera, "Do those places of employment have all things that I need as an employee to make my work satisfying and sustainable?"—return-to-work programs et cetera. There is a range of initiatives that we have in play and are continuing to develop that all need to be resourced, and that's where it starts to get challenging. I mean, we've heard about how the profession is really struggling from a financial point of view, and resourcing all of those things ourselves is impossible.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The recommendation about lifting the age cap for permanent residency came up yesterday. In your submission, I think the age is 45.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** It's 45, yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Not to be ageist, but do you think you would have a limit, or should we just open it for anyone who has the qualifications? You do say matching to the human medical field.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** You'd be well under.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I am, thank you, Wes. Thanks for getting that on the record. Do you think there should be an age limit if people are qualified? What are your thoughts on that?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** I think if you can demonstrate competency, then there shouldn't necessarily be an age limit. I guess what we're asking for is to say that 45 is far too young.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes. Hear, hear! I agree.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** Well, I'm on the other side as well. It's really limiting and also because the education to get to some areas, particularly those specialty levels—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Takes time.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** —takes time. It can take 10 to 15 years to get that skill base. We're missing out on that from overseas specialists.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In recommendation 7, you talk about a think tank to develop an after-hours model. I am interested if you've got any—even anecdotal—examples of places where you know that that's worked well. I was speaking to a vet recently from a regional community that has a vet nurse to take the call. This may be very common. They sort of triage as best they can so as not to disturb the vet on call unless it's absolutely necessary, which, again, may be very common practice. I'm happy for you to take this on notice, but are there any kind of standouts that you know amongst colleagues that would be something to feed into some kind of review on what best practice looks like in after-hour models of care?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** Sure. There are examples of regional centres doing after-hours in a way that is sustainable for all of the veterinarians in the town, and we can provide some examples of that. In terms of the think tank, it comes down to that whole aspect that, as a profession, we need to be able to get together and really talk this through and work out a plan forward, and undertaking that activity needs to be resourced. It has been quite piecemeal et cetera up to now, which is why there is a range of options. We note the development of the telehealth triage for after-hours, and that's a great initiative and we support that style of activity. Having said that, though, that comes at a cost to the veterinary businesses. If we look at our human health counterparts where they have access to that type of service, it is publicly funded. That's what we would like: to come together as a profession and look at what are all the options, what's going to work best for all stakeholders. When we say that, we're talking about the community and animals, not just the veterinarians.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You make a few recommendations about support for rural, regional and remote areas, which are, again, very consistent with some of the evidence we've had around things like HECS rebates and financial support. I note that you also call out access to child care, which, again, has come up a bit in the past day or so, particularly in rural areas. What do you find amongst your members and in your own personal experience? How much of an impediment can that be to workforce issues when people can't get access to the child care that they need?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** It's huge. Not being able to access child care means you can't work, full stop. Having access to services increases flexibility for veterinary workers, and flexibility is what the veterinary profession really wants. We've heard that time and time again, and offering a full suite of services in that rural and regional area allows that to happen. The other thing we would say is that there are a suite of services that are available or incentives for those professions that are considered essential, such as education and human health. What we're asking for is all of those affordances to those professions should be afforded to the veterinary profession as well because veterinarians, as we've heard, really are essential.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Did you want to add anything to that, Dr Lederhose?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** What Cristy said about "If you don't have child care, you can't work" is very true. We've heard from the vet board about the decreasing full-time equivalents and the amount of hours that they are capable of doing. We had a question about the prior generation of practice owners, which were predominantly older men. Our profession now is not that way; it's predominantly younger women. That's something that means that we need to accommodate that, but also we know it's not just young women who want to take time off for their families.

I've got a young son. I'd like to be able to take time off, but we currently don't have a guaranteed place for child care. We might not find out about that until January or February next year, and we're in a regional centre. That's true for myself, my staff and people at other practices as well. What it does is breaks up those early- and

mid-career vets from their career development and their professional development, which means they go, "Maybe vet's not for me because it doesn't fit in around what I can do." Looking at ways that we can support vets to continue their career, even if they're not working that full-time load, is really key. Child care's a key part of that.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I thank all of you for coming in today. We've heard a lot today and yesterday about Veticare. People have a very different idea in their minds as to what that is. I guess it's just a word at this point. We're talking as an inquiry about what something like that would entail. Am I right in saying that you are supportive of subsidised vet care for low-income earners as a way of existing veterinary practices to be able to recover costs in some of those situations? Say it was a pensioner that came in, and they could have a lower cost veterinary service but that the vets would be compensated through some kind of system.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I think the challenge here is about the continuum of care. I'll pass on to Dr Whitaker in a second. As a private veterinarian working in this space with someone with limited income or limited resources, there are many options available to us. We can reduce the standard of care. We can reduce options on the table. I'm not necessarily going to refer someone who's got \$100 in their pocket for an MRI that might cost \$4,500. That just doesn't make sense. It's not best for the patient or for the owner. The question is, is there a safety net? Do we want there to be a safety net for animals in New South Wales? That's what the Committee can consider.

Then how do we best access that safety net? Offering a high level of care for all animals in New South Wales, no questions asked, is not the answer, we don't think. But, when we're integrating and looking at how can we best spend our money, helping people to understand the options on the table and navigate that landscape is key. That's put onto private vets, who are in the room, trying to help the animal. That's all we want to do. We're trained medically; we're not trained social workers. That's where that's definitely an avenue for vet social work to play a part. Then having that safety net or that underlying funding to support that is, I think, the answer. But, Dr Whitaker, I might pass to you.

**ROBYN WHITAKER:** Thanks. As you said, that's the model which—veterinary social work, obviously, is very emerging. We literally have one veterinary social worker in Australia. Unfortunately, she couldn't join us today, so I'm here in her stead. We need to have the funding so that we can administer these types of packages, if you want to call them that, to the eligible clients so that they can get the services that they need for their animals. Veterinary social workers play a part in that role, where they can help to communicate with that clientele.

They can act as that bridge between the vet team and clients who have those needs. They can really just take away a lot of those types of aspects that—vets and vet nurses and everybody in a vet clinic have, for years, tried to be social workers. Some of them do an amazing job. There's a lot, in that space, that do great work. But it is really mentally challenging for so many. You need to again do this where the people who know their role do the best role and let the others do their role too. That's where that comes into it. So the funding is required. There is an example of this in Victoria, where there was a practice that is actually already piloting this through the Victorian Government.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Thank you. I suppose the other one that has come up quite a bit, which falls under this whole term of Veticare, is a system where vets can potentially recover, if treating wildlife or taking in homeless animals, the costs associated with that. There have been two ideas thrown about. One is that vets could potentially, in a similar system, actually try to recover those costs through some fund system or that there would be government-funded veterinary practices that would focus on those spaces, to alleviate that stress from vets who are currently doing that free of charge. I suppose it's quite complex again because, if you're looking at regional, rural areas and you've only got a wildlife city vet, that doesn't help anyone in a rural or regional area. Would you support some kind of a mixed system in that space? Or do you see something quite different?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I think the key here is what the goal of the service is. Is it to provide that safety net? Is it to make sure vets are sustainable in providing that service that the public and legislation expects us to do? We're expected to look after animals that are in our care, that are suffering. I can share a specific example of a dog that was hit by a car, that presented to me in my clinic, that we had to provide first aid for. It looked like it may have had a broken leg and a potentially punctured lung. We did X-rays on it because that's part of what we needed to do to establish what was going on with that animal. Once it had been stabilised, because it was an unowned animal, it got picked up by the pound, and we didn't see a single cent. The pound said, "Good luck. You can try chasing the owner." The dog got released, and we never saw anything from it.

That happens all across the country, every single day. It's especially true of wildlife. It gets amplified in emergencies and natural disasters. The question is, is the funding accessible? Is it appropriate for the type of work that we want these vets to be doing? We don't want it to be a bucket of money. No vet wants to have a free ticket

from the Government. What we want is to look after the welfare of these animals. These issues happen all across the State, not just within a limited geographical area around a particular hospital.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** What you're saying is that, if something like this was to happen, it would be—I think we heard from another group saying that there would need to be some kind of consultation process as to how something like this would run. It does sound quite complicated. As you say, you can get a \$10,000 MRI, which is optional. Does something like that come in through a government-funded system? Or does that fall out of that system? There's actually quite a bit to work through, I suppose. In your submission, you talked about not being supportive of some kind of scheme like that, more around—we spoke to other witnesses today, too—general public veterinary hospitals, because that would, obviously, create competition. Is that your main concern around that space?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** As we've talked about, the veterinary profession now is predominantly within the private sector. Making sure that it remains viable is making sure that that sector remains viable. That's part of the reason we're seeing some of the issues we're seeing. So we're firmly of the opinion that utilising that infrastructure and system, and helping that system to be able to recoup the cost for public good it does is likely to be the best outcome. Having said that, though, it goes to that point that this is complex—we all agree on that—and that there needs to be some very careful planning to make sure there are no unintended consequences to anyone who needs to benefit from these as well.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I think there's some research, out of the States, that shows that the type of people who seek low-cost vet services don't necessarily compete to a great extent with private veterinary practices, depending on the location and the socio-economics of the area. But the other thing too is that, when we're thinking about animal welfare, we're thinking about continuity of care. Animals don't see a vet once a year and then they're healthy for the year. If you have a truck come to your town that does vaccinations and maybe desexes the animal and then leaves town, you don't have a relationship with that vet. You don't have someone you can call up or go in for that small issue before it becomes a big issue, which ultimately saves money for the pet owner in the long run.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Absolutely. Just on that, as well, your submission didn't go into much detail about telehealth, but it's something that has come up quite a bit in this inquiry. It sounds like there's a place for telehealth, which can be fantastic. Where do we find that balance to make sure that telehealth doesn't step in to replace that one-on-one veterinary care that we so urgently need in regional and rural areas?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** I think that, yes, we agree: Telehealth is important. But if it's not administered carefully, it will have unintended consequences. Once again, it's about thinking through very carefully about what they may be and the longer term impact. It is difficult to answer right now all of those. Everyone will have a differing opinion, I'm sure. Our opinion may differ from the board's, which may differ from farmers' et cetera. Once again, it is one of those things where there needs to be really good consultation and engagement so we understand how it can work to benefit everyone, not just one group.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** If we look at how it is being used at the moment, I think that shows us how it can be used in the future, which is especially in the tele-triage space. When we have talked about a 24/7 hotline, and that has come up a few times—about how do we make sure that people can access vet services when they need to. We heard from the consumer advocate about having to call around six different vet hospitals. We don't want that. But having a tele-triage service is a really good opportunity to give people easy, quick access to vets, but then taking that load off vets for the actual work that they need to do. That's potentially a way to look at where it's most useful.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** To that point, telehealth is also work. There needs to be a mechanism so that the skill and expertise that is provided through that telehealth mechanism is able to be recouped, because veterinarians give a lot of free advice.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Absolutely. You also mention the THRIVE mental health program in your submission. We have talked a lot about mental health throughout this inquiry. I think you call on the New South Wales Government to fund this program. I'm wondering how much it would cost and what benefit funding that program would have overall?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** In terms of what's our blue-sky thinking? What would we love?

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Yes, blue sky.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Go big.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** At the moment we've costed this out at \$3 million over four years to deliver all of those things I just spoke to in that previous answer: programs that we've got underway in development, existing programs we have that we would like to expand out. That's the ballpark figure.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I think your submission goes into what can be achieved with that \$3 million, doesn't it? Or maybe I can put that to you on notice?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** Can we take that on notice?

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Yes, just to give a bit more detail. You're talking about \$3 million. What do you get out of those dollars? That would be really useful, because it is something we've talked about a lot over the last couple of days. I've got two more questions. One is around the mobile veterinary clinics. I note that you're strongly supportive of these. Would you support reforms to ensure services like that are able to be licensed? That's something we've heard about a lot during this inquiry—that we need to review that to make sure that those services can run.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** Yes.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** You go, Zach.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** Yes, it's part of the modernisation of the Veterinary Practice Act that we need. They have a role. They have a part to play. But there are also limitations, as we heard, about follow-up care and things like that that need to be addressed. Yes, the loopholes and the gluing it together that's currently happening isn't suited for what the public needs or what vets need.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** It sounds like we don't want that to be just a bandaid solution for regional and rural New South Wales. We don't want to have a telehealth and vet truck system just for those areas. What we need is to encourage more vets into those areas and then the vet trucks and the telehealth complement those services. Is that right?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** Yes, that's exactly right. We want veterinary practices embedded in those rural communities, and that takes investment and incentives to do that. An example would be that veterinarians aren't included in the regional relocation package that's available to certain professions in New South Wales. We would like to see veterinarians automatically included in that. Incentivising, and I guess the HECS component or the educational fee relief, is how to get people there. How to keep them there and allow them to develop businesses is going to require that suite of initiatives that involves and helps people establish business infrastructure in those communities so they stay there for the long haul.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** My last question is about financial support for animal charities. We saw a grant that went out to animal rescue organisations last year. I think it was about \$5 million. Wildlife groups have talked about different funding packages that they might get. Is that also one way of alleviating pressure on vets, if those organisations are then able to actually pay the vets with some of that funding—if it was part of the requirement of some of those funding models? Because I know that a lot of vets are offering half price for rescue organisations and it costs them as well. Is that another avenue that takes that pressure off vets?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** Yes, it is. I guess, to that point, though, as long as there's not the requirement for veterinarians to continually discount services. It's probably right that that's the avenue it's delivered through—through charities et cetera. However, veterinarians need to be able to make sure that the services they're delivering are able to be financially viable.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** That makes sense. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I have a couple of questions before I pass to Mr Murphy. To pick up on some of your comments: You do a lot of work and you need some government assistance to further that work, you are a member association, but obviously you are the peak association for vets in Australia. Pretending that I'm a full member, I pay you my \$894 and then I have a special interest in, say, equine, and that's another \$376 a year. What do I get? Or what can you deliver to me as a member for \$1,300 a year?

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Some maths lessons.

**The CHAIR:** You're a member organisation; you provide member services. I'm really interested. For \$1,300, what can you actually practically deliver for that member?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** I guess there are several areas. The first one is in terms of all of the access to programs that we have on offer, such as access to counselling and HR support for all of our members. We provide access to a range of programs such as employer of choice, which we've talked about, and return to work programs,

as well as a huge range of CPD offerings that come at a reduced price because you're a member. We run about 136 events per year, so there is a wide offering.

**The CHAIR:** But you do charge for those events.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** We do charge, but—

**The CHAIR:** I looked at your financial statements. You make about \$4.6 million on conferences and education. Obviously there is a cost there, but you clear \$1 million in profit.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** And then we return all of that into advocacy for the profession, unlike other commercial CPD providers who return it to the business owners. Everything goes back into advancing the voice of the profession, like we're doing today.

**The CHAIR:** Is there no other peak group in this space that competes with you? I'm just curious. You have a membership of around, according to your annual report, 7,600 members, but there's reportedly 15,000 vets across Australia. I'm just curious as to what those other 7,000 vets are doing in terms of support et cetera. Where do they go and why aren't they members? We hear a lot about the financial strain of vets but surely that's not the only reason why they're not a member of your association?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** I think there's lots of—it is an individual choice and there are other organisations. For example, myself: I am a registered veterinarian. I'm also a specialist-level veterinarian. I've got three colleges I need to belong to, to use my post-nominals. You have to belong to all of those just to keep credentialed. And then, in contrast to the Australian Veterinary Association, we have no linkage to—

**The CHAIR:** There is no legal requirement to be a member?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** There is no requirement to be a member. Essentially, it comes down to personal choice and what we deliver to members, which is advocacy and CPD, and I guess the whole profession gets the advantage of the work that we do. We would love everyone to be a member and we work hard to demonstrate our value. Advocacy for the profession is what we're working very hard to do.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Mr Donnelly and Mr Murphy might help you learn to picket, so you can actually—

**The CHAIR:** Have you seen the membership fluctuate or drop during COVID and this cost-of-living crisis we're experiencing now? Have you seen people pull back from your membership, noting that they have a legal requirement to be members of other colleges et cetera to maintain their accreditation? Have you seen your membership pull back at all?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** No, we haven't. In fact we're seeing it increase in certain areas.

**The CHAIR:** That's good.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Firstly, I want to focus around recommendation 6, which is the age requirement in relation to visas. You've heard some of the earlier evidence. First of all, it's right, isn't it, that one of the significant issues is we're not training enough vets to replace the full-time equivalent positions that we need in the industry?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I think that's probably a simplification of it. I think Australia is recognised as graduating quite a high number of vets per capita. We see the problem more as a retention challenge and keeping people doing the amount of work that they would like to do to further their career. It is an attrition problem more than a—

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Sydney uni in their evidence were saying that we've got a very small number of overseas students that are going back overseas; we've also got some Australian students that are going overseas to study. You would have heard the evidence earlier in relation to the boards. Do you think that's a significant problem and a blockage where it's taking up to two years and it is very expensive to have those overseas qualifications recognised and that we have so few overseas universities, particularly ones from our region in Asia, that are actually recognised?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** I guess I would answer that in terms of the fact that one of the reasons for the shortage is an unprecedented demand, particularly in the companion animal space, that wasn't expected. It was forecast to be about 1.8 per cent growth and it has been around 4 per cent. We've had increased demand in a particular sector. We're graduating a relatively large amount of students and we still have the shortage. And then I guess we've got this attrition problem. If we correct the attrition problem and if demand reduces significantly, or maybe it doesn't need to reduce that much and it may do because of the current cost-of-living issues, it may well be that we could have just the right amount of veterinarians or potentially an oversupply. We think that the

overseas veterinarian aspect is a short-term solution to plug the gaps right now and then the longer-term solution is to make sure that we are correcting the attrition problem and then, ideally with reform, to allow regulation of the whole veterinary team, where they're able to do additional activities that they're not regulated to do.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** You're already advocating for that as a short-term solution because of recommendation 6, where you say you should lift the age limit. But my question really is: How would that even help if it's then going to take somebody two years and an awful lot of money, potentially, to get their qualification recognised?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I think we can speak to recommendation 5 above that. The entire process takes two years but, after you've completed the multiple choice skills assessment, you can work under supervision of a registered veterinarian in New South Wales, which is fantastic. That's partially to mean that you have a higher pass rate of that very expensive practical exam at the end, but it also means that these people get a chance to integrate in the community and find a practice that works for them. At the moment, that's under the financial pressure of that individual overseas-qualified veterinarian. There are incredible costs before you attempt the exam that you're going to pass it. If there is something we can get out of this Committee's inquiry, it's that if we want more overseas graduated vets to be able to work in New South Wales, we can look at how can we fund them to get that experience in vet practices in New South Wales and how can we subsidise the cost of that expensive exam.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** You don't think there is a problem in terms of recognising degrees from other countries or the cost barriers if it's not a recognised degree of going through that system? You don't think there is a problem there at all?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** We think there is a problem with the cost barriers. I think the New South Wales Government can step in to remove that barrier. But the barrier, as we have heard from the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, is that it's a cost recovery basis. No-one is making money off this. I'm not aware of their costings—I know that's a question on notice that will be answered. But if the New South Wales Government wants to encourage more overseas vets to work in New South Wales, that's one way that they can do it.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** What we do want to see is high standards of veterinarians working in Australia though. We want to make sure that the veterinarians who are coming from overseas are working to the standard that we as a profession expect and the community expects, because that's one of the reasons why there is such trust in the veterinary profession.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** But you can't be suggesting that the only university in Asia that trains people professionally and is of a high standard is one university in Hong Kong. What about all the other universities in Asia? They don't have their degrees recognised.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I think it is a really good question. That's not what we're trying to say. It is a question for the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council. The other challenge is it's not just a New South Wales problem. If you become a registered vet in New South Wales, you have mutual recognition, so you could practise across the country. We want to make sure that high standards are in place in New South Wales so we don't see people who don't have an adequate degree or don't have adequate skills could use it as a gap. Not that I think that will happen, because the exam is quite good. But, yes, I think it is definitely a question for the AVBC.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** The other area I want to focus on, something that was quite alarming for me that came up yesterday in evidence, was that we heard there are laypeople out there practising, doing what would otherwise be veterinary services: things like performing dental work on horses and other types of operations. The issue for me is at the moment we have a number of different authorised charitable institutions, government departments, police that are responsible for dealing with matters in terms of animal cruelty. Do you think that there is, if I call it this, a prosecution gap where things like that are just falling between the gap because there's no one body, like the police, that's responsible for investigating and dealing with that? Maybe the RSPCA says, "We focus on this area," the police say, "That's an RSPCA problem," the Department of Primary Industries says, "We don't want to get involved." I wondered whether you had anything to say about that?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** As we put in our submission, we are concerned about who is looking into those people who are performing acts of veterinary medicine where they shouldn't be. It is a real gap that is very frustrating for the profession, because we know that there are people performing acts of veterinary medicine and it's very difficult for those to be investigated and followed through. Reform around—

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Sorry to interrupt you, but why do you say it is difficult to investigate? Appointed charitable institutions have the power to seize papers, go onto premises. I understand these people are advertising their services as an alternative to vets.

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I think the challenge is that, as you have identified, there is a prosecution gap here. Under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act the enforcement agencies, all of them, are incentivised to only pursue the cases where they can get a successful prosecution. So you need to be doing some quite egregious acts to be successfully prosecuted. The other challenge that you have is you're in breach of the vet practice Act if you're doing this for personal profit. If you're helping out a mate and you stitch up his horse or you yank a tooth or you convince that person not to pursue you under any civil litigation, then you're in a bit of a pickle. The other challenge is resourcing the vet practice Act. Yes, they are the people who are given the powers under that framework but they simply don't have the resources to go out and investigate.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Who should take responsibility for that, in your view?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** The question comes down to the gap between three different pieces of legislation. Each group has a huge amount of responsibility at the moment, so it's hard to identify which group needs to take it on. That's something that we would like the Parliament to—

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** And I guess it needs to be resourced.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** It's hard to fix if there is no real suggestion. Should one agency, like the police or DPI, be given the power to deal with everything and the responsibility to pursue those people?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** Can we take that question on notice and come back to you?

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Yes. Thanks. That was the last question I had.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Do you mind if I—

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** No, it's my turn.

**The CHAIR:** We will go to the Hon. Greg Donnelly and then if we have time we will go to the Hon. Wes Fang.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** You can put yours on notice. Thanks very much, it's a very helpful submission. We appreciate it very much. I just have a couple of questions. The first one is to help me flesh out my own understanding—I can't speak for others around the table—about the structure of veterinary practices and the emergence of particularly the corporate businesses now which are manifesting.

Is the primary reason for the manifestation of the corporate business structure particularly driven by the need to have that size to be able to expend the money to provide that really top-level service in terms of the equipment required to provide these high-end services? I'm just trying to understand, is there an inevitability that that's going to continue to roll—in other words, the corporate structure and the corporate delivery of veterinary services—because it will have to be required to afford what is the equipment required to run a modern veterinary practice?

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** I think the corporatisation of veterinary practices in Australia has followed on from what's been happening around the world. It was a natural progression to come to Australia because it has been successful elsewhere. They are very well positioned to invest heavily in infrastructure et cetera because of their sheer size, and it's very difficult for the small business owner to do that. I think that it's likely, based on what's happened around the rest of the world, that corporatisation will increase in Australia. It currently sits at about 19 per cent, if you count everyone in the market, and there are also those societal and generational changes that are likely to impact as well.

The bottom line is that, because of the variability in our workforce, different types of businesses suit different people to work in. The corporate situation—a lot of people really like that larger style veterinary practice, whereas other people like that small business, and there is also a large range of people working as independent veterinarians running their own practices.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Just further, then, you've got the corporate at this level, at the smallest level you've got, for example, in the suburbs—suburb X—a veterinary practice working from an old home that has been refurbished and has facilities down the back for the pets and what have you, at that bottom end, if I could describe it that way. What's in the gap between the small and the corporate? Is it just that, as you move up, a bit like in medicine, you might have a medical practice, where you have, not part of a corporate structure, formally, like a well-known trade name, but multiple vets working from a single premise, offering a service—and that grows until you ultimately get to the corporate at the very top?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** I think it's not a natural evolution from a single vet practice to a corporate. We've got competing incentives. The corporates do have vertical integration and they have economies of scale and all of those things. To deal with the market forces, you have some practices that come together, or you might

have a group of vets who own three or four different practices to pool resources, and then you also have specialist hospitals coming up in the space, as we have more highly qualified people. It's quite a diverse landscape of industry, if you think about it. I think the challenge is, yes, the costs of care continue to increase. An X-ray machine could cost \$50,000 to \$100,000, an ultrasound's the same, lab work, blood machines, not to mention the cost of staff.

The market does have a lot of different forces that are pressing in on these vet practice owners, and then those vet practice owners have to then pass those costs on. But what's interesting when we talk about supply and demand and things like that is often vets are people who want to care for the animals. We find that some vets, instead of increasing their prices to reduce demand, as we would expect in another private industry, will increase their hours or they will discount services to make sure they can facilitate the care for those patients. That's because all of the free work that they're expected to do isn't currently being supported.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** In terms of this free work, are there vets who, dare I say, to use a phrase, take a bit of a hard line and say, "Listen, I really want to run this as a business. I really don't want to be working all of these extra hours. I treat it as a serious vocation through my paid work, but this other element to it I'm not that interested in"? Does that exist, or is that unusual?

**ZACHARY LEDERHOSE:** That does exist, but it's sustainable when you're supported by a safety net that happens there. We see that happen more in cities, and we also see it with socioeconomic factors as well. In some suburbs—suburb Y, compared to your suburb X—you have a market that can bear very high costs. They will buy a \$10,000 dog because it's fashionable, and they will spend \$200 a fortnight at the groomer, and then they pay for their premium vet service on top of that. Now, there are very different forces there compared to a lower socioeconomic area, but the animals still deserve care. That's the challenge.

**CRISTY SECOMBE:** I would say that, just as a point to that, we are legislated, though—if we are presented with an animal, we need to assess it, provide first aid and euthanasia, if required. Even if a veterinary practice chooses that they don't want to do a significant amount of work at no cost, they would still need to do that under our legislation.

**The CHAIR:** That concludes our time with you. You have taken some questions on notice. The committee secretariat will be in touch. You will have 21 days to get back to us. Thank you very much for your time and testimony and for answering our questions. It is very much appreciated.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**Dr JOANNE COOMBE**, Chief Veterinary Officer, NSW Department of Primary Industries, affirmed and examined

**Mr SCOTT HANSEN**, Director General, NSW Department of Primary Industries, sworn and examined

**Mr BRETT WHITWORTH**, Deputy Secretary, Office of Local Government, NSW Department of Planning and Environment, affirmed and examined

**Mr ROB KELLY**, Executive Director, Regional Delivery, Local Land Services, Department of Regional NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to our last session today on the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales. We now have witnesses from the New South Wales Government. Does anyone want to make an opening statement before we go to questions?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Just very briefly, if I can, Chair. Thanks to the Committee. This is a topic that is incredibly important not only for the primary industries, the livestock industries, the animal industries and the community in this State, but as a significant employer of veterinarians across New South Wales, both for DPI and for LLS, it obviously has a significant impact as well for our workforce and the staff that we have. We know that just about every one of our strategic outcomes that we seek to achieve across Primary Industries is tied to having enough veterinary capability to help us with our emergency animal responses, animal welfare, our productivity, our research and our diagnostic capabilities. We're acutely aware of the stresses currently on the occupation, not just within New South Wales but across the country. We're really keen to work with the Committee and with all of the witnesses you've had come before you to try to find solutions and a long-term path forward to make sure we've got those capabilities across the State of New South Wales.

**The CHAIR:** We've just agreed to ask some free-flowing questions. I might start with a bit of a baseline. In terms of the vets that you employ, how many do we employ across the whole of the New South Wales Government but, more predominantly, primary industries and DPI?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** And LLS as well.

**The CHAIR:** And LLS, yes—across the spectrum that you're in control of.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I might make a comment about DPI and then I'll throw over to Rob to make some comments about LLS. I would highlight that we probably don't know the full suite of all the vets across the New South Wales Government because many of them may well be vets but may not be employed in roles in which they're practising or utilising those veterinary skills at this point in time.

**The CHAIR:** Let's limit it to people employed specifically to do veterinary work. That's probably more beneficial for the inquiry.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** We have 23 vets who are employed for veterinary activities. However, when we talk about veterinary activities—we have an additional set of staff I'll talk about in a minute—that 23 are largely the staff who work on veterinary and animal biosecurity policy. They're people who report to our chief veterinary officer. They work on the risk assessments, they work on educating and they work with producers. They work in our animal-welfare unit providing veterinary advice and veterinary technical assistance for us.

Outside of that we have an additional 53 staff who work in veterinary pathology, veterinary virology, veterinary research, veterinary virology research or bacteriology. All of those are critically important for our diagnostic and surveillance activities for biosecurity across the State. We're lucky we've got that full suite of staff decentralised and spread across our offices across the State in New South Wales. I might hand over to Rob, who can comment on the field vets, because the veterinary staff that we have largely do the policy, the process and the research components, and the veterinarians that LLS have are the ones out on the ground working with the farmers. So I might hand over to Rob for his numbers.

**ROB KELLY:** Thanks, Scott. Local Land Services is the largest employer of field vets in Australia. We currently have 53 veterinarians across New South Wales located across the 11 regions, and an additional 4½ vets that are vacant roles at the moment. Our role really is unique to New South Wales government, providing on-ground support to livestock managers with a history across the various predecessor organisations, but we also play a critical role in the on-ground surveillance on farm, in saleyards, in animal production, on farms and with sheep, cattle, pigs and goats, to check for animal health and disease issues. It's really important, the role that they play, because it supports market access and trade by maintaining New South Wales biosecurity standards and contributing to Australia's freedom from many devastating animal diseases.

We also play a really critical role in natural disasters when they strike, such as fires and floods. The district vets play a role helping the producers by undertaking animal-welfare checks and vet assessments, and assisting with euthanasia of impacted stock. Like all vets across the State and probably Australia, we do have a shortage in Local Land Services, predominantly in the western region. The western LLS region covers about 40 per cent of the State. They are currently without a full-time vet out there. We're covering that either by utilising local vets on a contract basis or by servicing it from other regions.

**The CHAIR:** You've answered my next question, Mr Kelly. Mr Hansen, are you experiencing similar shortages in terms of your vet pathology work or generally across the vets? Do you have a shortage or unfilled vacancies in the positions that you need to fill?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I'd probably articulate it more that we have continued difficulties in trying to recruit in a timely fashion. We've currently got the roles we need, but it takes us a long time to find a senior pathologist or a senior virologist. We find it difficult at times to fill those when there is a vacancy created.

**The CHAIR:** Do you feel like you're hindered in expanding your work or doing more of the work that you're doing because of that difficulty?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I might ask the chief veterinary officer to make a comment on this. Everyone adapts, and the way in which we've adapted is probably that we've created closer partnerships with private veterinarians and with the universities over the last couple of years than what we have had in the past. We've turned a lot more to providing incentives for diagnostics—for example, for samples to be sent in to us for our veterinarians to be able to assess them as opposed to sending the vets out to collect them. We have been adapting our programs to make sure that we don't leave any gaps but, at the same time, if we had more no doubt we would further adapt those programs to be able to do more.

**The CHAIR:** We took some evidence yesterday that they believe there is a lack of vets that specialise in fish or aquatic life. I'm interested to hear from your department. Obviously, fisheries would potentially see that impact. I'm wondering whether you could comment on that issue that there might be a lack of specialised knowledge in aquatic life or marine life?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Our aquatic veterinary capability sits under our chief veterinary officer, so I might get Dr Coombe's comment.

**JOANNE COOMBE:** We do employ two aquatic vets—a senior and a veterinary officer—in the aquatic team. We've actually just refilled the second position this week, so we've enrolled someone this week into that position. My assessment is that that's enough technical expertise within my unit for the work that we're doing with respect to biosecurity in the aquatic space, but I am aware that we have had difficulty filling those positions when they've been vacant.

**The CHAIR:** That was going to be my next question. You just answered it.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I might add quickly to that if I can. It's a good example of the partnerships that have been created with the private aquatic veterinarians who work for many of the marine- and land-based aquaculture companies. That's been a critical part to our development of response strategies and plans for preparedness with emergency animal diseases around aquatics, and we draw heavily upon the scientific and technical capabilities of our 450-odd strong fisheries branch in terms of supplementing the technical expertise that our aquatic veterinarians have.

**The CHAIR:** When you talk about partnerships, are we talking about a fee-for-hire service? Is it something that you contract out, or is it a volunteer partnership? Can you describe the relationship in more detail? When you say "partnership", are you essentially contracting this work out or is it pro bono?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** A bit of all of the above. Sometimes when I use the word "partnership", I'm talking about the fact that we'll sit around a table and talk about where risks lie, what things need to be addressed and how we address those risks. When we rely on our private veterinarians to provide us with boots on the ground to assist us with activities—say, for example, in an emergency response—they get given cost codes in which they charge us like they would charge any client. That's redeemable; that's payable under those emergency responses.

**The CHAIR:** So would the white spot closure and the work that was done in that space have been essentially contracted out because it was a boots-on-the-ground response?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I'd have to take it on notice to check, but there may have been elements in which we paid. But in large part, they were the vets of the premises on which—so when I talk about a partnership on that front, we were sitting with them and running through where the likely risk pathways were, running through scenarios about how it might have got there and then working with them about what remediation needed to be

done, what clean-up and what decontamination needed to be done. So we're relying on their intimate knowledge of their operations and their procedures, like we would with anyone else, but we're drawing on their technical expertise as well. In that sense, we wouldn't have been paying them for that component.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Mr Kelly, I want to go back to your numbers of vets and vacancies, and I'm happy for you to take this on notice. I think you said there are 53 vets across the 11 regions. Would you be able to provide the Committee with a breakdown of how many work across each region, just so we're aware of the size of the workforce across the State? I am happy for you to come back with that.

**ROB KELLY:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Particularly out in the western region, because we had some evidence yesterday that there wasn't a field vet out there. Would there normally be one position out there, or what's that allocation?

**ROB KELLY:** No, the current vacancies that we have in western—I mentioned there were 4½ vacancies across the State. Western has four vets and one team leader, and they're all vacant at the moment, either through maternity leave or through resignations. They've been unable to fill those roles, but I'll confirm those exact numbers for you and a breakdown of each region.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be great. It probably wouldn't be too much to make the point that clearly the western part of the State is where you're having trouble with your staffing—which is not unique to you guys; it's something that you see across government.

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, our biggest challenge is in western. But other regions, as well, we struggle. Even vacancies in Albury take six months to fill.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you offer any different incentives to vets, in terms of their salary packages and things, to come out to the harder-to-staff regions? Is that something that's available?

**ROB KELLY:** We're starting to look at that. At the moment we operate under the LLS award, so that sort of inhibits what we can and can't do. But we've started a process at the moment where we're looking at how we can amend that to incentivise vets to work in difficult or hard-to-fill locations. We've also started a graduate program, which we launched last year, working with the universities. I know western plus a few other regions will be getting some vets out of that process as well. So we're going into the universities, particularly Charles Sturt, early and offering them work placements and then putting on graduate vets that we hope to then be able to retain in those. But the workforce planning issues, which was sort of what you were alluding to there—we've got a process in place where we're working through that, and we're looking at all available options to incentivise vets to work in hard-to-fill regions.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** We've certainly heard evidence to that effect for the private sector as well. They've talked about things like HECS reductions and different ways—again not unique to veterinary services but something that we certainly see in regional areas quite a bit.

**ROB KELLY:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of your field vets, I have heard anecdotally—and I'd be interested to hear this officially—that sometimes it is more tempting for vets to come and work for the government because it can mean better conditions and not as much overtime. I have heard that that competition between the private sector and the public sector is very much there and that you guys might have the edge over the private sector. Are there requirements to work overtime in the same way? If there was an outbreak on farm, whether it was lumpy skin or foot-and-mouth or whatever may come into our regions, I'm assuming that they would probably have to be on call and be there, but what do those sorts of working conditions look like if you're a vet employed by LLS?

**ROB KELLY:** Historically you probably were correct, in that our conditions were better than private vets' and our pay was better than private vets'. We don't have an on-call roster. We do get call-outs that vets can attend, and they have time frames in which they need to attend—sort of in that first 48 hours. That was a bonus and an advantage for our vets—they didn't have to work overtime and didn't have to work weekends. We've seen a shift away from that now, where we're not as preferred because private vets now can offer significantly more money than we can because we operate under an award. We're also seeing they're becoming more flexible in the conditions around overtime and working weekends and things like that. Historically, yes, you're right, we did have an advantage. We don't have that anymore, and we tend to lose vets out of the system now because of that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'll ask one more question, probably to Mr Hansen but I'm happy for anyone else to answer. We've heard from quite a few witnesses, both yesterday and today, about whether the

Committee and the industry could explore more collaboration between the private sector and government. Earlier today witnesses from the Australian Veterinary Association were talking about whether you could share pathology or diagnostic facilities—things that have happened in the past but don't as much anymore. It's very open-ended, but do you have any comments about that? Do you have any ideas or ways that, coming out of this inquiry, we could see a bit of collaboration across all parts of the industry so that we can get some better outcomes, not just for animal welfare and things like disease outbreaks but also for workforce support?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Yes, definitely, and I'll throw to Dr Coombe in a minute to talk about some of the opportunities there. But before I do, one of the key thing that we need veterinary practitioners for is as both our front line and our policy and our surveillance and our diagnostic in the event of emergency disease outbreaks. In the event of even a medium-scale emergency disease outbreak, which will cost the State billions of dollars, there is no way we can successfully combat that without the assistance of and without turning to private veterinarians across the State.

We already have had multiple situations in which we have had suspect cases that private veterinarians have investigated. We've been able to get them to partner up with our diagnostic labs at Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute and get samples rapidly across to there to be tested and the results back out. Those kinds of partnerships exist on a day in, day out basis. Again, I use that broad term "partnership", but in this case we typically pay for the couriering, the sampling and the testing of the samples as part of our commitment in that partnership piece. We see plenty more opportunity for broadening that, formalising that and expanding that.

We also see the opportunity to help work—especially through our responsibilities under the Veterinary Practice Act and the regulations—around the kinds of things that we can do in partnership with the industry to be more inclusive of the full team that operates veterinary practices, whether they be veterinary nurses, as well as working out how and what kinds of services can be offered across the full gamut of the animal carers that exist across the State. We think there are tremendous opportunities. Quite often the hard part here is just working out where to start.

We've always had longstanding relationships with the Sydney unis and with the Charles Sturt unis with regard to veterinary training and the use of our facilities. I think you heard commentary yesterday around the use of our Tocal facilities, in terms of their importance for large-animal training facilities in particular. We have always had longstanding relationships; we look to continue to build those. We find more and more, in our emergency responses, we turn not only to private practitioners but to the community to act as citizen scientists for us, in terms of collecting data and information and being able to input that to help us do our jobs faster and quicker.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's useful. Did you want to add anything, Dr Coombe?

**JOANNE COOMBE:** I didn't have a lot to add other than, as Mr Hansen said, that engagement piece with the private practitioners. It is, at this stage, more limited towards the emergency animal-disease response and biosecurity training. But there was a huge project completed last year around—especially because of the FMD risk increase—that we conducted, including incident management training. We offered 500 spots. They haven't all been taken up, and we're continuing that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** For vets specifically?

**JOANNE COOMBE:** For vets and other para practitioners to actually do that awareness of the emergency management training. With respect to that emergency animal disease and biosecurity piece, we have been doing a lot of engagement and will continue to do so.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** I thank everyone for making themselves available today. It's very much appreciated. I'll start with Mr Kelly and actually one of the topics my colleague Sarah Mitchell was addressing earlier. Just in relation to the vacancies that are existing in the western division around vets, how long has it been since there has been a vet employed in that position within western region?

**ROB KELLY:** The last sort of tranche of vets—so they had four vets in total, and I'll confirm the exact numbers—was probably July. It has been a couple of months. Sort of June-July, so a couple of months.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** In that circumstance, where we would have, say, as we did previously, an outbreak of something like Japanese encephalitis in the Griffith area, what would be the process that would be undertaken to look at and analyse where that might have come from? I'm sure that there'd be a role for those vets to look at—there was a lot of chat around the piggeries in the area. I'd imagine that that was your teams that were actually looking at that. What would happen in this instance where there are no western division vets available to be deployed?

**ROB KELLY:** How we work that—and Japanese encephalitis is a good example or any other sort of emergency animal disease. Contingencies were put in place, particularly at western—and we would do this with

our other vacancies—where the neighbouring regions would go in and support and fill that gap. They're fictitious boundaries on a map, more or less, so it doesn't stop a vet going across those regions. We also use private practice vets and have them sort of like on the equivalent of what would be known as a retainer-type thing. So we would call them in to go out and fill that while we actively go in and recruit. We would combine with moving vets in from other parts of LLS, support that gap as well as collaborating with private vets to support it as well.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** In the instance where we had the Japanese encephalitis outbreak previously, what did we do in relation to deploying teams from the Department of Agriculture and Regional NSW through LLS into the area, into those surrounding farms or agricultural businesses, piggeries et cetera? Were we on the ground pretty quickly? Did we have a lot of testing and services deployed in that instance?

**ROB KELLY:** Mr Hansen is probably best to answer that because we're the sort of support agency; they're the lead in that.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Yes. Basically, the Friday night that we had the phone call to say we had a confirmed positive diagnostic, that was passed on by the Chief Veterinary Officer. By the next morning an incident management team were stood up, and their job is basically to fill out the roster of roles that are required across the area that's required and then—we draw across all of New South Wales. As you'd be aware from many of our previous responses, we could be going for three months, we could be going for six months or we could be going for 12 months, and just to rely on resources within one area is impossible. We have to rely upon being able to bring people in and rotate people out. So that's our job to assemble that roster, have that roster ready on stand-by, including a roster of private vets across the State that are trained and ready to assist us in emergency animal disease responses. Our job is to deploy them as quickly as possible, no matter where they are or where the response is.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** But, in the first instance, is it not fair to say that it's the local teams that you would deploy first? Obviously, have those back-up or support resources come in and scaffold and wrap around that team in order to support their work, but they would be the first touchpoint that would be on the ground. Would that be fair?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Yes. Normally, the locals on the ground or the nearest locals on the ground are the ones that we build around, though very rarely are they enough for day one. Normally, we are already flying people in and bringing people in to sort of supplement teams right from the very start. In a recent case where we needed urgently someone to assess livestock out of Broken Hill, within an hour of receiving the call, we had an LLS vet from Dubbo redeployed out there to go and check and do an assessment. We were able to get samples from that vet, courtesy of our partners in police being able to fly those samples into our labs very quickly.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** That is pretty impressive. I think that's really good. It just strikes me as interesting, though, because I do recall when that outbreak was first identified—certainly, in the days following the initial cases that were identified through Health, and then I imagine Health would have that reporting structure that would come through to the chief vet and then down through those channels. And many of you would remember the Hon. Mick Veitch, who was a former member of the Legislative Council as well. He was a Labor member. I don't think he was preselected again for election. It was quite unfortunate. But he was quite critical of us—sorry, as the former Government; he was quite critical of the former Government, I should say, in relation to the response there. He was a member of the Labor Party. Now that we've got a flip in the structures, it's interesting that we've got now those vacancies in that western division where we wouldn't have anybody landing in the first instance. I find that quite striking. Is there—

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Point of order: Is there a question somewhere here or is this a bit of a statement?

**The Hon. WES FANG:** I was getting there, Mr Donnelly. You know I can sometimes ask a very long question. You might know what that's like.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I'll wait for the Chair to rule on that, but it seems like a statement, not a question.

**The CHAIR:** I would hope that the honourable member would be getting at some point to a question. He is renowned for his long wind-ups.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** It wasn't that long. It was only about five minutes.

**The CHAIR:** I would hope that he will deliver the ball to be batted in the next sentence.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** You can't rush. You've got to build the suspense. You can't rush these things.

**The CHAIR:** We're suspended enough.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** I'm getting ready for estimates. That's all I'm saying. It's bit of a prep.

**The CHAIR:** I would ask that the member get to the question.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** I guess the question I would ask is that in relation to the western division where, obviously, we've got any number of agricultural businesses and quite a lot of reliance on ensuring that biosecurity is important, is the Minister or her office looking to have those positions filled with any haste? Is the Minister looking at any programs in order to see those positions filled? Can anyone provide any—

**ROB KELLY:** From the LLS perspective, we are actively recruiting for those roles now. It's not like—once they become vacant, we actively go into recruitment mode to secure vets. As I've said earlier, previously, we're backfilling those roles with vets from other regions, neighbouring regions, still within two hours of most parts except maybe for Broken Hill, given where the vets are located, and we've paired up vets from across the State to go in and support as well as having private vets on. If we needed to get somewhere quickly, we would contact the private vet and they would fulfil that service on a fee-for-service basis.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** No matter where we put vets, we're not going to have a vet in every town on the government payroll. We're always going to have a gap across the State.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** Not under this Minister.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** It's all about how quickly we can deploy resources to any of those areas. I'm not the aware of the criticisms that you refer to, but I am aware that within 48 hours of us responding to the heads-up on Japanese encephalitis we were also deploying veterinary officers to the north coast for a major flooding event that was just starting as well. So we were splitting our teams. We had both teams from the south deployed to the north coast and teams from the north coast deployed to our veterinary capability teams on Japanese encephalitis.

We take seriously and make sure we've got the right people at the right place at the right times. If we can't do it ourselves—all of our emergency disease responses are actually partnerships with all other State and Territory jurisdictions as well as all of the industry partners that are associated with the disease outbreak. Our current varroa response has 16 industry partners as well as every single Territory and State and Federal government in the country. We are happy to put our hand up and ask for assistance from other States if we need additional expertise to be flown in, to be brought in. Likewise they ask us to provide our veterinary expertise up to their responses when they need to. I said earlier to your question, Chair, everyone has adapted to the fact that there aren't the same number of vets that we used to have available. We have adapted our process, our systems and so forth. We'll continue to do so, to make sure that we don't leave a gap in our capabilities across the State.

**The Hon. WES FANG:** I was going to ask if the Minister's failure to get those positions filled might've actually aided the increase in feral pigs, but I note that my time's probably expired. So I'll hand over.

**The CHAIR:** There is no expiry time. I'll just pick up on Mr Fang's question, Mr Kelly. You said that you started the recruiting process now. My understanding is that the recruitment process in government jobs is around a four- to six-week period, all things being well and you don't have to readvertise because you're not happy with the applicants. Is that what we're working towards, a four- to six-week period between listing of the ad and onboarding?

**ROB KELLY:** The aim is to get them as quickly as possible. Yes, on average, it's four to six weeks. That'd be pretty quick, to be honest. It's normally six to eight weeks. Our aim is to have them out, advertised and recruited and on ground within the shortest possible time that we have available. We do know, because it is difficult to recruit vets at the moment, it's taking longer to get through those processes. But, confirming what Mr Hansen said, we will always have a vet available to respond immediately, no matter where they are in the State—even if we have to fly people in—to resolve those issues. We are actively recruiting and pushing hard for western.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I noticed that we weren't provided any submission from either the DPI or the Office of Local Government. Is that correct?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Yes, that's correct.

**The CHAIR:** I think we got one from local government.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** There is a local government one.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Can I ask why there wasn't a submission?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** We weren't necessarily invited to make a submission. We were also focused on preparing a submission for the pounds inquiry as well. I think that was where our focus was.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** We didn't make a submission to the inquiry. We're here giving evidence and happy to support the Committee with whatever additional information they require and they seek. We were providing information to a number of the organisations who have made submissions to you, who came to us seeking information for their submissions. We are happy to fill in any gaps that you have with regard to inquiry submissions.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** We've heard a lot, in this inquiry, about the expectations for vets to provide a lot of pro bono services. This comes to both of you because there were accusations, obviously, of animal cruelty but also within the councils' systems. We heard today that, because of the vet shortage, there were claims that some of the council pounds—because they couldn't access vets to euthanise animals, they were being crushed by doors or given random drug overdoses. What consideration or policy work has been done within both of your departments to deal with the regional and rural vet shortage and the fact that they're not available for many of these systems where, obviously, they're so desperately needed?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I might just talk to the work that we've been doing to try to partner up with private practitioners and private vets to help take some of the load for them in terms of information distribution, talking to clients, talking to their customers within regions, whether it be about animal welfare—that might be something as simple as us producing a fit-to-load guide that is able to be distributed widely by vets without them then having to take each of their customers through an animal-welfare issue, using our materials to be able to do that; and us attending their meetings to talk through materials that we have available for them to be able to distribute to clients.

Probably one of the most tangible steps we've taken on this front is—as you'd be aware, coming into the last drought, it was particularly useful—our stock welfare panels, where we're able to proactively step into a situation where, in many cases, a vet or a neighbour saw a poor animal-welfare outcome on the horizon because of lack of feed in paddocks and so forth. We're able to step in, and we're able to bring in not only government vets and RSPCA vets, but we're able to bring in vets from outside the area to release the burden of the local private vet from having to deal—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Were those vets paid, that were brought in?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Yes, they were.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I will go to OLG as well, but going back to my question in regard to the pound issue, crushing a dog with a cage door is, obviously, an animal-cruelty issue. I'm assuming that would've gone through—actually I think the evidence was that it had gone through to RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League. But, as the DPI, with the portfolio for animal welfare, what work has been done within the portfolio of animal welfare to deal with these ongoing animal-welfare issues because of vet shortages in these areas?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** It continues to be that community education, the provision of materials, whether they be online or whether they be through veterinary networks or—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** But is the provision of materials going to substitute for the lack of a vet to provide euthanasia to animals?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** No. But, in the absence of knowing that they need a vet to provide that euthanasia and to make sure that they know that slamming a steel door's not a suitable solution, that leaves an additional gap. We will never have a vet in all circumstances in which animals are being dealt with. What we can hope is that in the vast majority, if not all, cases of people dealing with animals, there's self-compliance with animal-welfare expectations of the community, because that is the very best way in which we intervene in these. The specific circumstances around councils having access to vets, that's something I'll refer to my colleague. But each council knows the numbers of LLS. They know the numbers for DPI, and we have vets available. I'm not sure it's an availability-of-vet story.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So you're saying—

**SCOTT HANSEN:** It's not a defence for the animal cruelty that you just described, no.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I'm not suggesting that it would be a defence. I'm just not sure I understand. I would expect most people would understand that crushing an animal's head in with a door would be an act of cruelty. I'm just not sure how material explaining that to people would be enough to circumvent these issues.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Materials for pounds, explaining to them their obligations and who to contact in the event of a situation, I expect, would be an education piece and might alleviate some of those kinds of circumstances.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Are you suggesting that if any of these council pounds were to ring up the Department of Primary Industries you would make a vet available to them, no matter where they were located?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** That would be a far preferable outcome than the outcome you just described, yes.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Sorry. I haven't given Mr Whitworth an opportunity to speak.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Thank you, Ms Hurst. First and foremost, if there is evidence of the sort of horrific acts that you're talking about, then I would hope that people are bringing them to the attention, first and foremost, of the RSPCA, the Animal Welfare League or the New South Wales police, because I think that's horrific.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I believe that they have been.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I don't know that this is the right place to talk about those things when there are proper processes in place there. The other thing I would like to add is that the role of a vet in the rehoming process is very much around making a decision as to whether an animal should be euthanised, and doing that on the basis of whether the animal has suffered irreparable harm or cruelty and it is inhumane to enable that animal to continue to live. I suppose, from a broader policy perspective, our focus really should be on trying to minimise the number of animals that are in that situation—trying to ensure that we are encouraging people to be responsible pet owners. That's the core and underlying process behind the Companion Animals Act: that people take an animal on as a pet and as a loved addition to the family. They should be responsible for its care.

We have provided a number of funding opportunities to a number of community-based organisations to help them to produce those sorts of information about responsible pet ownership, and to improve the range of desexing programs, particularly for cats, as a way of trying to minimise the number of animals that are taken to a pound without any understanding as to who owns them. There are a number of pieces of work going on there. I suppose the final point that I want to make is that the Government has identified that it is important to look at and refresh the animal-welfare framework. I think the Government's submission to the pounds inquiry, which is another inquiry being conducted by the upper House, will address and go into that in a bit more detail.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Thank you, I appreciate that. In regards to some of the Acts—and I'll throw back to you, Mr Hansen, as I believe your department is responsible for the Veterinary Practice Act. What strategies are in place to support the wellbeing of the veterinary profession, given the high rate of mental health concerns and suicide that we've heard about in this inquiry?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** We've been working with the Veterinary Practitioners Board and the AVA over the last year in consultation about what kind of steps and actions might be taken, either (a) as action with legislative regulative reforms, versus (b) industry engagement and industry working. Some of those opportunities that I know of have surfaced in some of the discussions over the last two days—having things like the opportunity to share the workload through registration of vet nurses. I think that that's one in which—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Is there work underway on that already that we're not aware of?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** We've certainly been discussing and looking closely at the West Australian model for that, to look at how that might work over here. The potential for registration of student vets—to have them under supervision doing work. Again, this is about reducing the load. Now, again, there are logistical issues there in terms of adding to the workload of registered vets to supervise the student vets, but it may well be a solution and a step in the right direction. The potential for us to use telehealth for veterinary practitioners, the better streamlining of approvals to get overseas vets working in Australia quicker, the potential for mobile vet practices to have a simplified registration approval process—and I know that's one that we've been working on for a while, to try to get a solution on that front.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Sorry, when you say we've been working on all of these things for a while—and I note that you're sort of highlighting some of the things that we've heard here today. How far along are we in regards to seeing some kind of legislation that would come to Parliament in this space? If you've been working on this for a couple of years, how long does this sort of reform package take? How far along in that process are we?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Over the course of the last couple of years in these discussions, we've all landed at a clear point around what kind of solutions are required. For every one of the things I just outlined, there is a pro and a con that needs to be addressed in anything we do moving forward—a good one being the registration of student vets. When we first talked about this, this was seen as we're just adding to the workload of registered vets and it's not going to help us. But as we work that through, we find additional solutions and we come up with additional plans as to how that might work. I think, given the importance of this topic, given the impetus of this Committee and given the likelihood—you've heard the alignment of views coming out of witnesses over the last couple of days. I guess that's one of the key things.

We could not have done these things in isolation ourselves. The Government could not have. The industry could not have. It is going to require everyone working together to do that. That is what we are hoping for out of this inquiry: that it actually gives us a framework to bring everyone together. In terms of legislation, as you know, the Veterinary Practice Act dovetails in with the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. We would want to make sure that we don't leave any gaps in any of the reform pieces around animal welfare or around this that means things slip through the cracks. I am unsure as to what our timing will be.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Are you suggesting that the Veterinary Practice Act won't be reviewed until the POCTAA review is complete?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** No, I'm just saying one needs to keep in mind the other as it gets done.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Okay. One of the recommendations that has been suggested to this Committee is a review of the Veterinary Practice Act. If there's already this work that has been undertaken by the DPI over the last couple of years, do we need to be reviewing it or do we simply need to pull out some of those recommendations and make it into legislation?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I think we've been doing work on it. A lot of that work came about through consultation coming into the period of State repeal for the regulations, looking at what can be adjusted and what can be fixed. Some of those pieces are just regulatory. Some of those do need to be written into legislation. I think the ideas and the suggestions that have come forward about review of that Act would seem appropriate, given the evidence we've seen here in front of the Committee.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** We've also heard lot of evidence at this inquiry that the New South Wales Government relies heavily on private practice vets in emergency situations, and that they're not receiving any kind of compensation for the work that they do in a lot of these emergency situations. I'm wondering what has been done to ensure that vets are—and we're also hearing that the emergency management plans are not centralised. There seems to be a whole lot of confusion when these emergencies do come into place. First of all, I'm wondering what's being done to ensure that—and I understand that obviously your DPI vets would be paid to deal with emergency situations. But what I'm talking about specifically is deploying other voluntary vets. What is being done to ensure that they are being compensated for the work that they're doing so that we can ensure that we have enough vets to deal with these emergencies? And what kind of change around central management plans is taking place?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** We've now built private vets into those emergency response plans and that's part of the training that we've also been providing. As people go through the training, they get added to the rosters and registers that we have.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** How many people have gone through that process?

**JOANNE COOMBE:** One hundred and six to date.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** In New South Wales?

**JOANNE COOMBE:** Yes.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** And they would all be compensated if they were deployed?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Any vet who does tasks in response to an emergency response for us is compensated.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** What you mean by "compensated"? Are they paid, or are their costs covered to travel there?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** It's paid for their time as well as any costs that they've incurred against different—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Why did we hear from several witnesses through this inquiry that they weren't compensated for their time?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** That is because quite often what we'll find is vets providing assistance either to clients or to others—out-of-area vets coming in and providing assistance that we're not aware of. They're turning up and we're not aware until after the event. When we coordinate the use of private vets, we pay them for the services that they provide.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** If we talk about the floods that occurred not that long ago, how many vets did you fully pay to be part of that emergency response team?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** That's a question I can take on notice and see if we can get the number for.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Yes, please.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** On the North Coast, with the size of the response up there, we actually put in place a special provision—in agreement with the Commonwealth Government, who co-fund our response activities—in which vets could actually incur up to \$10,000 of treatment and be reimbursed without seeking prior approval from us. That was for certain categories of activities and so forth. But we recognise the fact that quite often in these events everyone just piles in to help. Sometimes it's hard to delineate between who is turning up to volunteer to help, versus who is turning up to help and then expecting reimbursement for their time and effort in that help. What we've tried to make clear in all of our engagements with vets has been the fact that there is a process by which we can triage and deploy their services and those services are actually paid for and accommodated within the costs of the response.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** If there were veterinary organisations, say there were some wildlife groups that wanted to make sure they were out there and part of that emergency response, they could simply tell the DPI that they want to be part of that response and they would be compensated? Or would they need to be approved? And if they need to be approved, what is that approval process? Because one of the concerns that I've heard about is people waiting on the DPI during an emergency response situation. Obviously DPI has its own limitations in resources and if we're dealing with an emergency situation it can take some time to reply to, for example, a wildlife organisation that's wanting to get out there and help.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** As I said—and I'm going to make this trickier than it needs to be now—if there's a wildlife organisation that's looking to provide assistance to wildlife during an emergency response, it's not actually the agricultural and animal functional support area, which we lead, that they need to come to. It's actually the environment functional support area that they need to go to.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Let's take the wildlife out of it just to simplify it for today and talk about other animals that would fall under your department.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** In which case they should definitely come to us. They should let us know their skills, their capability and their time frame that they're available for and we would task them up with roles immediately to be able to get out there and they'd get paid for that service.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** When you say immediately, do you mean if somebody was to contact the DPI that they would hear from you within hours?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I don't know the time frame that we committed to, but they'd hear from us quickly. Whether they'd be deployed quickly would be determined by whether we needed that skill set immediately in an area for that task. But they should certainly hear back from us quickly to outline what our next steps, what our processes would be. But again the major difference there is we would be tasking them with going and conducting jobs that we had coming in to us as requests from landowners for assistance, as opposed to necessarily landowners going directly to their own vet, saying, "Can you do this for us?" and the vet coming back to us and saying, "I've just gone and done that." That's the change that came out of the North Coast floods. It was just a tightening of how we work with the private vets, how we streamline that process and how we work with the AVA, the vets without borders, to make sure that we've got—as you'd remember out of the North Coast floods we basically paid Animal Welfare League to sit with their trailer at our Wollongbar research station and triage everything that we could send to them in terms of domestic animals for that whole period of time.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Obviously once we're in an emergency it can become quite a scattered approach, as we heard during those flood periods. What's being done to ensure that, in the next emergency that we have, we're not going to see a repeat of that? What sort of communication has been put out there, especially given over the last couple of days we've heard that it is still sort of this scattergun approach? It doesn't sound as though that communication has been received by many organisations that there are these centralised systems being put into place.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I'm sorry, I'm trying to think of what emergency responses we might have done since the floods in which we might have actually engaged with private vets. Have there been ones that have come forward in the last—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Sorry, my question was—the feedback we received around that particular emergency was, as you said, that there were vets that were just turning up and helping out. There didn't seem to be an understanding of any kind of centralised processing that was happening, and that has been criticised in this inquiry. The issue I am hearing is that there is a belief, certainly amongst many organisations, that that's still the case: that in the next emergency that we might see, no work has been done to centralise that. What communication has come from the DPI to make it clear to these organisations that actually this is the centralised process, this is

the management we want to do and want to coordinate with you, given the feedback we're getting is that they don't believe that's the case?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** No. And so I'm hoping that they're still relying on feedback of what happened in 2022 in the floods. Because, as you'd be aware, out of that not only did we do a post-action, after-action review and pick up on all the bits that we needed to join the dots on and connect up better with, but also this Parliament—in fact I think we sat in here in a parliamentary inquiry into those floods and had conversations about what were our learnings and our lessons, and a report and recommendations came out of that for us to be able to pick up. There's been an enormous amount of work in terms of agreeing to working arrangements with a number of these vets, setting up the rosters and the registers for these vets, putting the funding in place to have private vets go through emergency incident management training. There's been a whole range of activities that have been undertaken post 2022 that we haven't had to test for efficacy yet and—touch wood—we won't for a while. But there have been a lot of lessons and a lot of work done since then to better join up and better connect up the capability and the skill sets on the ground of private vets and the needs of landowners and animal carers during major emergencies.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I have a question for Mr Whitworth as well. You mentioned in your previous answer the companion animals rehoming grants and how those sorts of processes are really useful for helping plug that gap in the system where you have got animal rescue organisations trying to pay for veterinary fees out of fundraising. Then you have got vets having to go cheap veterinary costs and there is this real gap where vets are feeling pressured to do this and losing money out of it. Then you have got charities that are under the pump to raise money. I believe there was recently \$5 million that was distributed to these rescue organisations to help them to deal with that. I'm assuming that one grant of \$5 million will obviously come to an end very, very quickly. Is there discussion within the department to make those sorts of grants annual to help with those ongoing veterinary costs within these animal rescue organisations?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** No, there's not. These were, I suppose, opportunistic grants to help address particular issues. The decision as to whether those grants would be provided on an annual basis would need to be a decision for government, taken within a budget context. I don't think I can answer that anymore than that.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Mr Hansen, how many prosecutions did your department commence in the last 12 months under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** That would be a question I would have to take on notice and a good one for us to prepare in advance of estimates coming up. Thank you.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** If you are going to take it on notice, I'm going to ask Mr Whitworth the same. Do you know how many your department has commenced in the last 12 months?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I can answer that quite easily, Mr Murphy. None, because it is not the role of the Office of Local Government to undertake that prosecution.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** You're one of the authorities under the Act, aren't you?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** No, sorry, sir. We're not. We're not one of the authorities. The authorities under the POCTA Act are the RSPCA, the Animal Welfare League and the New South Wales police, not the Office of Local Government.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Well, the DPI and the Office of Local Government are listed as authorities that can commence prosecutions. If you're going to take that on notice then can you provide me with the figures for how many prosecutions were commenced by either of your departments in the last five years and how many were completed?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I can answer that, sorry. It's been zero, for the reasons that I've given you before.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** And I'm happy to take that on notice.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** What I wanted to know that information for is because of an issue that came up in evidence yesterday, where we heard evidence particularly from Dr Isaac Graham—I think it's on page 14 through to 15 of the transcript—who raised an issue where there are laypeople competing with vets. Dr Erica Kennedy also spoke about this in a more general sense, with people getting advice from Bunnings on how to treat an animal and on what insecticide to use, or whatever outlet people buy goods from. But the particular issue from Dr Isaac Graham was he said that people are using sedation on horses to do dental work, and they are advertising their services. I'm just wondering who would prosecute that? Would one of your two departments take that on as an issue?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** I'm sorry, I'd have to take that on notice.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Take it on notice. Have a look at the transcript.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Yes. Whether it's under the Veterinary Practice Act or whether it's under the use of veterinary chemicals compliance areas, I will take that on notice and come back to you on that.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** One of the issues that I wanted you to comment on as well, if you can do that today, is whether there's a prosecution gap here where, between the police, charitable authorities and departments, no-one's taking responsibility for prosecuting people where there's animal cruelty or there are people administering poisons who aren't entitled to and so on.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** That last one about the administration of therapeutics or chemicals that they shouldn't, again, I'd have to take that one on notice and look into it. But the issue around prosecutions—I think every year we provide data about the number of prosecutions commenced or the number of penalty infringement notices issued across the charitable organisations. I know we table their annual reports, and that also lists those out. There is evidence of those activities occurring. Whether there are ones that are falling between the gap, that's probably a question that we can talk to our partners in either the police, the Animal Welfare League or the RSPCA about whether they feel as though there are any gaps in that space.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you for coming in this afternoon. Could I just return, if I could, please, to you, Mr Kelly, on the matter of those vacancies that were discussed in some detail a bit earlier on this afternoon in your evidence, just to clarify for myself the answer you provided. That is that the vacancies are known, but there is a program of recruitment which is being undertaken to fill those vacancies. That is correct, isn't it?

**ROB KELLY:** That is correct.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Based on your past experience, in the role that you've had or other roles within the department, if a vacancy continues to remain unfilled for whatever reason, could you just explain for the edification of committee members what then happens? Is there ongoing and continuing recruitment until that vacancy is filled, or is there some other approach taken to address what is that vacancy that's proving hard to be filled?

**ROB KELLY:** It's actually probably a combination of both. We will continue to recruit until we get the vacancy filled. But while we are doing the recruitment, we don't just sit and wait for that if there is a gap to fill. We look at how we can fill that through other mechanisms, whether that be through short-term secondments, whether that be through continuing to use private practice to support that, or whether it be rotating vets through from other regions where we can move people around. In addition to that, that's why we started the graduate program as well. We are trying to look at a longer term pipeline of bringing in particularly vets, but we are doing it for ag roles as well, into hard-to-fill areas, so we can get them in earlier and work through that.

The third tranche to that is we are looking at how we can provide better incentives to recruit vets and other roles into really hard-to-fill regions, particularly with western. We've only just started that piece of work, so we are working through the workforce planning aspect of that on what we can do. But we don't leave any stone unturned in trying to fill those gaps, support those regions and make sure that we are providing the service that the landholders and farmers need, and that we are not creating the perception that animal-welfare issues or animal disease issues will go unattended. They will certainly be attended in a timely manner.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I am not asking you to look into a crystal ball because we don't do that, but would you anticipate, in general terms, if there continues to be this challenge of filling those vacancies, that all of those things that you've just gone through, those various examples of activities, initiatives and ideas to try to tackle these vacancies, that will be brought to bear on dealing with this vacancy situation out there at the moment?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, it's difficult. I'm not pretending. It's going to take a while to fill those vacancies in the western region. We are still looking at options. To give you an example of an option, while we want the vets to live and work in the region that they are serving, we may have to look at almost like a FIFO model, where they might want to live at Dubbo but they spend a week in the region and then a week in Dubbo. That's just an example. But we are looking at ways and options that we can provide a service and make it attractive to recruit vets and other professions to those regions.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** That has been very clear. Earlier today we had evidence from the Sydney School of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney with Professor Norris. In the submission—you don't need to have it in front of you; it is submission No. 161—on the last page, just quoting from it, there are

changes to governance and regulation. These are some ideas that have been bowled up for us to think about. At the third dot point it says:

- Exploration of opportunities to leverage NSW Department of Primary Industry for assistance with diagnostic testing, surveillance and advice, without cost to veterinarians or practitioners.

I will just read them out again:

... assistance with diagnostic testing, surveillance and advice, without cost to veterinarians or practitioners.

I am just wondering, in terms of addressing some of these issues that we will continue to face, presently and into the future, involving obviously animal welfare, with these bodies like the universities that have serious skin in the game—they run the degrees and all of the associated programs around the degrees—do they have consultation with yourselves where they bowl these matters up? On the face of it, as a layperson, there seems to be some merit to that point, but it's interesting that it's coming through an inquiry to get back to yourselves, I suppose. Is there a straighter line of sight from the institutions that are training the vets into yourselves, where some of these ideas are put into the pot, so to speak, and allowed to percolate and give you some insights into what might work?

**SCOTT HANSEN:** There certainly is. It's interesting because last year we actually ran three-quarters of a million dollars' worth of tests through our lab at EMAI for diagnostics and surveillance that we received from both private vets and from universities and that we paid for the diagnostics on. The idea is already maybe not at the scale that they would like, but it's already in play. We do have vehicles by which we sit down and have these conversations. We work quite closely. They use our facilities for a number of training activities. They have their own facilities, obviously, in Western Sydney as well, but we make the most of—the State, over many years, has invested in and created one of the country's best biosecurity research and surveillance and diagnostics centres at the Elizabeth Macarthur Ag Institute. A regular part of just about every veterinary student's program is engagement with that facility. We are constantly working on how do we close those connections. We have already taken on board the piece around how we incentivise and utilise private vets and universities submitting samples to us for testing. If that needs to be scaled up, that's the kind of thing that we can talk to them about.

**JOANNE COOMBE:** From my perspective, you may note that I only came into the position on 21 June this year, but my first visit to Sydney was a visit to Professor Norris. So I'm certainly very committed to forging and/or continuing to forge those relationships with the veterinary schools. I'm very aware of that being the pathway to broadening not only the rural supply of vets but also the department's supply of vets. I'm sure, through those continued engagements, we'll be able to cover some of these issues and discuss them further.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Others can speak for themselves but it struck me that there was very much an acute awareness, from all the institutions that are being represented at the hearing and also through submissions, of this great challenge. They do appear from the evidence provided—perhaps some more than others—to be very much alive to that and refining and developing courses, programs and what have you to try to deal with those matters. This may seem a little bit off-centre, but I'll bowl it up. The issue of pet insurance has been raised in this inquiry. People can obviously purchase insurance for their pets' medical needs. If you don't have a view just tell me or take it on notice but, in terms of this matter of welfare for pets in this State, do you think the matter of pet insurance plays an important contribution and is something that should be encouraged or promoted over time to try to improve the financial underpinnings, to some extent, of veterinary services and the vet industry in New South Wales?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** That probably falls into my bailiwick more than any, but I go back to the principles of the Companion Animals Act about responsible pet ownership. Where we see acts of cruelty is where someone has either lost the financial capability to look after their pet or there are other circumstances that exist in their life that would mean that they don't necessarily have the funds or the capability to look after pets. Pet insurance would be a "nice to have" but I think if you went to mandate it, then you're talking about an increased degree of cost.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I was not proposing that, but I understand the issue you're getting at.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** What we have been trying to do is to get to a more immediate bar of having more universal desexing, registration and microchipping so that we can understand where pets are and you can return stray animals to their owners more quickly. To take it to the next step could be financially challenging. How do I draw a line? In other places there are inquiries about dangerous dogs and the implications and people looking at the causes as to why a dog will become dangerous. It's very much about the behaviour of that dog, what instils that behaviour and the sort of environment that that dog is living in, and there is often a financial element behind that. I think it sounds good but it does have challenges.

**JOANNE COOMBE:** I'm not giving my perspective as CVO here but just my own personal experience and anecdotal conversations I've had with colleagues. While I didn't practise in the UK—obviously, I'm from the

UK originally—both there and in the US where I have many colleagues that I went through vet school with, it appears that pet insurance is much more prevalent, competitive and, therefore, affordable. Here I think it's less well established. While there is some pet insurance, the premiums may be somewhat cost prohibitive, and they may not cover a lot of the really expensive procedures that are actually what hold owners back from continuing with treatment.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** If I remember correctly I think they said the insurance rate in the UK is about 25 per cent or thereabouts. The example was given of Sweden where there appears to be some obligatory requirement for insurance for cats and dogs, and I think in that case it's up to about 85 per cent of cats and dogs. So the contrast in jurisdictions is interesting. Thank you very much. That's been really helpful.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I have a very quick question, which you can take on notice if you don't want to answer it now because I realise it's 4.45 p.m. Recommendation 7 from the Australian Veterinary Association talks about potentially funding a think tank to develop an after-hours model of care for the vet industry. I wondered whether each of your agencies would have a view on that. Obviously, a potential disease outbreak might happen on a Sunday morning. You might get a stray cat on a Thursday night that needs treatment. I think both government agencies and the private sector have a bit of input into what an after-hours model of care could look like as best practice in the State. Any thoughts about either a think tank or what that could look like would be useful for the Committee, but I am happy for you to come back to us given the time.

**The CHAIR:** That concludes our time with you.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Sorry, Chair, can I close off one question that I had left unanswered, which was about the number of vets we had engaged in the North Coast floods? We had 20 vet clinics and businesses that invoiced DPI for our services during those floods. That's not the number of vets because in each clinic they might have had one vet or they might have deployed 10 vets, and it was actually the clinic that billed us for the services of those vets.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So there's no record of how many vets.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** Of the individual vets, no, but 20 vet clinics and businesses.

**The CHAIR:** Did anyone else want to reduce their homework? I offer this at every budget estimates hearings—an opportunity to reduce homework. It's an old schoolteacher habit.

**SCOTT HANSEN:** We appreciate the offer every time.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** The Office of Local Government is not an authorised officer under the POCTA Act. I'm sorry but we're not and neither is the Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. That concludes our session for today. Thank you very much for your time. It's valuable as always.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**The Committee adjourned at 16:50.**