

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 4 - REGIONAL NSW

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

CORRECTED

At Inverell Shire Council Chambers, Inverell on Thursday 14 December 2023

The Committee met at 9:50.

PRESENT

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Chair)

The Hon. Rachel Merton

The Hon. Cameron Murphy

The Hon. Peter Primrose

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The CHAIR: Welcome to the third hearing of the Portfolio Committee No.4 – Regional NSW inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales. I acknowledge the people of the Kamilaroi nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal people 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. I would ask that everyone in the room turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses may say outside the hearing, so I would urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants, and I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of those procedures.

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Dr JO HOAD, Owner, Uralla Veterinary Clinic, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our witness today, Dr Jo Hoad. I would encourage you to relax; I know it's set up like a court, but we will just have free-flowing questions from the Committee members. Just treat it like a general conversation. I will now throw to my colleague the Hon. Rachel Merton.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Thank you very much, Dr Hoad. I very much appreciate your attendance. The opening of your submission refers to the demand for veterinary services increasing and demand for higher standards of veterinary care also increasing. Would you elaborate a little bit on that? From a practice perspective, what are you seeing?

JO HOAD: Since I started 20 years ago, people's perception of their animals has changed. It has gone from people having a dog in the backyard that they throw their table scraps to people now having fur babies that sleep in bed with them. There is a lot more—with the advent of the internet and the TV shows, people are a lot more aware of things that are available, so they are starting to ask for more things. Also, people are more willing to spend more money on their pets. Whereas 20 years ago if a dog had a broken leg quite often it would be euthanised, now they want plating, gold-standard care—that type of thing. It's slowing down a little bit with the uncertainty in the economy, but especially during COVID our services were a lot more in demand. A lot more people were getting pets and breeding pets, because everyone wanted a puppy, so people were breeding a lot more puppies and kittens to meet that demand. That's where we've noticed it.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: You mentioned the increased demand for vet services. What is your experience in terms of animal insurance? Are people insuring these pets? Are they recognising the cost of pet care?

JO HOAD: It's becoming more common. I think in the cities it's a lot bigger thing. When I located in the UK, it was much more part of the general society over there. It's increasing here—particularly, we've noticed, in people moving to the area from the cities—but it's still not high enough really to help. We'd like to see a lot higher percentage than what we are seeing.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: In terms of the insurance rate?

JO HOAD: Yes. But insurance isn't—people still often have to pay those costs up-front and then get reimbursed. Often they'll have to take out a loan with their pay or put it on Afterpay or something like that to be able to pay us and then get reimbursed, unless you've got a company that will provide everything up-front.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: The Committee has looked at this in the earlier witness presentation today, looking at international students. I pick up in the submission the suggestion here about possibly capping the number of international students and subsidising places for a certain number of domestic students to compensate for the loss of incoming international students and bringing or making international students—putting a minimum five-year practising obligation on them post qualification and training.

JO HOAD: Yes. It's just from speaking to vet students. They've just said that there's a high percentage in their years. I haven't talked to the unis directly, but it's a big drain if you've got a huge cohort that are leaving the country and not even practising. I know, for the unis, vet is a really expensive degree, so having full fee paying students helps to offset costs. The unis would find it difficult to cap their numbers unless they had some other source of income to compensate for those. But maybe, if the students could come and just practise for a set amount of time in Australia before they went back overseas, that would help to—because we're graduating plenty of vets in the country. It's just they're either—the attrition rate is quite high, so they're dropping out after five years, or they're not even practising in the country. They're going back home. It's crazy. The American students—it's cheaper for them to do their degree here and go back home, earn more money and pay their vet loans off faster that way. I think that's just not right.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Have you had firsthand experience with international students or graduates?

JO HOAD: Mainly we've had a couple of American students come through most recently. We haven't had any from any other countries, I think, in the last five years. But just talking to Australian students, they'll say that a big proportion of their year is international students.

The CHAIR: We've heard a lot about the attrition rate, the burnout rate. Do you think the universities are doing enough in the space of, I guess, more of those soft skills in terms of running a practice, dealing with clients, having those difficult conversations versus obviously all that technical medical knowledge that they need?

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JO HOAD: I can't speak for most of the unis. I've had a couple of students from some unis say they are doing a lot more role-playing—like difficult conversations with clients and how to deal with where things aren't going right in your communication with clients and they're getting upset and aggressive. It's starting but there's a lot more room to go. I know the Lincoln Institute is trying to get into some of the unis to help teach not just the skills of communicating with clients and animal owners but also the business skills, like how the income comes into a vet clinic.

Because when I first graduated I can remember telling my boss, "I'm not in it to make money. I don't care about the money. I just want to look after the animals." But since I've become a business owner I've realised, well, if I'm not charging money and not making income, I can't pay my staff, I can't pay my drug bills. I just had no understanding of the costs that were involved in running a vet practice. I think there needs to be a lot more of that as well. And they are doing some mental health type resilience things to help prepare some of the students for trying to juggle work-life balance, but I think there needs to be more done in that space.

The CHAIR: Those students that you've seen that have come through and have done those role-playing activities and training, do you find that they're a little bit better when they first get in on the ground and start doing that for real? Do you think they are better prepared because of that?

JO HOAD: They are—I guess, most of the students we attract are people who want to work in a rural area as well. They're more able to speak to farmers and people in rural areas, so they're probably coming from a background where they've got a bit of those skills. I find the students who have also had jobs before coming into vet, whether it's been working in a cafe—they've often built a lot of those soft skills and communication skills. Whereas the students that have got really high ATARs, gone straight into uni and haven't got much real-life experience—even with that background, it can be a little bit harder for them.

The CHAIR: Do you think that should carry more weight? Those sorts of things, that previous experience and that natural inclination to be able to talk to farmers and whatever—do you think that should be taken more into account in the admission process?

JO HOAD: Some of the unis—so CSU has an interview process. Their entrance is not purely based on their grades. They're taking into account their communication skills, their prior experience as well, as far as I know. But I think it shouldn't—by focusing on really high ATARs, you're leaving out a cohort of people that may not be academically up in the really higher echelon but they've still got enough intelligence to be a vet. But if you're taking only the really high-marking students, you're only taking the top 2 per cent, whereas probably the top 10, 15, 20 per cent could cope academically with the degree—so having a bit more of an emphasis on communication skills and other skills that come into being a vet.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Following on from that, after university, who do vets talk to to actually get those business skills? It's been raised a number of times. I presume vets talk to other vets and they talk to people in the community. But if you needed to have business skills, if you had a difficult individual you were dealing with, if there were other types of issues, who do you approach about sorting those out?

JO HOAD: What I've done personally is—there are a couple of companies who are doing leadership- and business-type training. I've been doing some work with the Lincoln Institute, who have given not only just leadership and communication skills but also the financial skills that I need. Speaking with other local vets can be good; it can also be bad. But sometimes you can learn from their mistakes as well. I know some vets have done MBAs to try to help. I've even just talked to other business owners—not vet business, just general business owners—and done a couple of short courses along those lines. It may be changing in the unis a bit more now, but most vets of my generation have graduated with no business knowledge at all. We're a pretty ordinary business. Unless you get help, you're not going to succeed as well as others.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Would you regard that as a significant part of the stress that vets have to cope with?

JO HOAD: I guess, as an employee—employees probably struggle with charging clients to some extent, because they'll feel sorry for people and they'll want to charge less. As an owner, definitely it's a stress because you've got to find the income coming in. If you're not charging appropriately, or discounting heavily, your business is going to struggle. As vets we generally go into it because we want to help people and their animals and so will often discount bills so that we can treat the animal rather than have it suffer, and that doesn't work well from a profitability point of view.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: In your submission you talk about it being a retention problem and that there are significant difficulties. We've covered some of the ground where you say it might be better if—I think you were saying universities have an interview process that might lead to a wider range of people doing

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the degree. Do you think it would be better if there was a focus on taking people who are already in rural areas out to study to become vets, so that then they go back to the places that they've come from, in a sense?

JO HOAD: I think it does help, in a rural sense, because people know what it's like to live in a small rural community. But we also need to be able to keep the vets in the rural areas. I've experienced it personally and my associate's experiencing it at the moment: We can't get child care. If you've got a sick child who needs extra support, often you've got to be going backwards and forwards from Sydney. There's nowhere locally. Also, your spouses, your partners—

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: What sort of things do you think could be done? In other industries where there are retention problems you have employers offering additional benefits to try to attract and retain employees. Are there innovative ideas that could happen in this industry to encourage it?

JO HOAD: I have thought about getting a nanny. My vet has managed to get a small amount of day care, but even getting a nanny is not always easy in a regional area. But that's one thing that can help a little bit with child care. I'm quite flexible with my hours so I'll work in—I think the days of working a set "you've got to work from eight to six" isn't going to work in our industry. Most of us in our clinic are parents, so we try and work in and it's a bit of give and take as well. It may be you start later one day and you might work a little bit later the next. We just try and work in and accommodate. We're all parents—if you need time off for a sick child, you take time off. We try and be as flexible as we can in that regard. It could be helpful if—I've heard some people say that some industries, they'll have childcare spaces set aside for people in certain industries. Whether that could be—

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Yes. In my former life I was a barrister. The Bar Association used to organise childcare spots. In Sydney it's relatively easy, but also in Parramatta and other places where there were reserved places that could then be utilised by people who needed to. The profession, through the Bar Association, did that. Is that something that maybe vets as a group could look at?

JO HOAD: Could do. I guess that in Armidale, where I'm from—

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: It's hard when everyone's working in different places.

JO HOAD: Yes. In Armidale, where I'm from, there's a two-year wait. There's a new childcare centre opening and they've already got 300 people on the waiting list. It's whether those childcare centres have got the capacity as well. But definitely, if it could be arranged and there was the capacity—I know of a human emergency doctor who can't get child care. She was thinking about maybe having to leave Armidale. We struggle to get doctors and things. If it's something as simple as child care, that shouldn't be a factor in this day and age.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing. Before I call a close, is there anything that you would like to add or that you think we haven't covered that you desperately want to get on the record to us?

JO HOAD: Sorry, I've had two nights of no sleep with work.

The CHAIR: Maybe that's an important thing to get on the record!

JO HOAD: I had all night on Monday night and then I left work at one o'clock because I thought, "I have to sleep or I'm not going to be coherent today." But I'm really grateful that you've come regionally, because regionally it's really different to city practices and we've got our own unique struggles. But we do provide a really valuable service in the small communities. If a town loses a vet, that's a big loss for animal welfare—also that security of, if exotic disease comes through and there's no vet there to pick up on it, that can affect our international trade. I think we should be doing everything we can to try and keep vets in rural and regional areas. That's all I can think of.

The CHAIR: No problems at all. Thank you very much, Dr Hoad, for taking time out of what obviously is a very busy profession to come and talk to us. It's very much appreciated by myself and the Committee.

(The witness withdrew.)

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Dr GREG POWELL, Owner, Inverell Veterinary Clinic, affirmed and examined

Dr GLEN BORROWDALE, Inverell Veterinary Clinic, affirmed and examined

Dr HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM, Inverell Veterinary Clinic, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witnesses to this hearing. Would any of you like to make an opening statement before we go to questions?

GREG POWELL: Fire away.

The CHAIR: No problems at all. The Hon. Rachel Merton has the call.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: I thank the three of you for being here today. I very much appreciate being able to come to Inverell to meet and discuss this with you. Maybe it would be helpful, just in terms of an insight into the make-up of the vets in each of your practices, to know who's relocated, who's local, whether any international graduates or students—

GREG POWELL: We're an eight-vet practice. I'm here because I came here years ago and my wife is from here, which is the case for another three of us men who are here because of their wives. There is another vet from Croppa Creek, which is not far away. That takes five males. The three girls—Hannah, do you want to speak to that?

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: I just moved for the job. I quite like to be rural—I've got quite an interest there. I'm originally from Wingham and was working the Central West out at Warren. I came here for the job, basically, and am getting more settled here, which is good. Then the other two girls, they were probably just chasing a mixed practice, I'd say. One of the girls has moved because her partner has a place here as well, so she moved with him—I'd say both for the work and the situation, I suppose. Georgia, I think, was probably more the job, I'd say.

GLEN BORROWDALE: The job, yes.

GREG POWELL: Glen, do you want to elaborate on you and Matt or something?

GLEN BORROWDALE: On which?

GREG POWELL: Do you want to elaborate on yourself?

GLEN BORROWDALE: When I came to town—I'm actually from the coast and came to the country out of interest. I've pretty much forever been chasing animals, basically. I became a mixed practice vet—I had to go back to school to become a vet, so wasn't just straight out of school and straight in like the majority of the intakes. I've been a vet for 11 years now and it's the best decision we've done. I've cemented into the town here and won't be leaving. Our practice is now, what, 19 staff members, eight vets? It's going okay, but it's always a balancing act on how we operate and maintain vets.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: In terms of retention of staff?

GREG POWELL: It's 26, 27 years for me; 10 for Glen; 10 for Matt; 10 for Charlie; Hannah has been here—

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: I'm nearly three.

GREG POWELL: Our nursing staff, Zoe started when she was 16 when I came here in 1996. Taylor has just gone on maternity leave. She is almost 10; Jess is almost 10. We've had quite a few long service leaves to pay.

GLEN BORROWDALE: But I think staff that have left have left for moving rather than leaving the industry. But the selection criteria that come in is specific. Hiring someone that wants to be in the country is nearly essential, otherwise they're not staying. You can get locums come in or full positions but they're very expensive and short term, and clients suffer and the business suffers.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: We've sort of looked at some of the international students. I'm just wondering whether you've had any exposure to international students or whether they have been part of the practice.

GREG POWELL: We employed a couple of international locums 11 or 12 years ago. The only experience with internationals was that long ago. We had a couple of gaps to plug at one stage. That's the only international vets I've ever dealt with.

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HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: I don't have any, sorry. I don't have any experience working with them either.

GLEN BORROWDALE: Without knowing anything else, internationals could be a solution but it would be short term I would think, as in short-term stays rather than long term. There is probably a cost. Having someone come into the building for the first 12 months is finding feet within the business. How long they're there for would be a question for me. Employing full-time, sure, but having internationals come in would be fine except having them stay in the district would be my concern.

GREG POWELL: We've never had a need to do it so have never gone down that path.

The CHAIR: Out of interest, how many vet nurses do you employ?

GREG POWELL: There are five vets and 14 other staff, so that would be from admin through to vet assistant nursing type roles. One part-timer in that.

GLEN BORROWDALE: Eight vets.

GREG POWELL: Sorry, eight vets.

GLEN BORROWDALE: Eight and 11.

GREG POWELL: Yes, 11, sorry.

GLEN BORROWDALE: Eight and 11.

GREG POWELL: You lose track of time.

The CHAIR: We've heard a bit throughout this inquiry differing views on the veterinary nurse role and whether there needs to be some more formal accreditation or qualifications attached to that. I just wondered whether you had any views in that space.

GREG POWELL: We've got several who've done the cert IV training. We've got another couple who have got ag degrees—actually that's three now—and then just wanted to work in a clinic environment. A lot of it's pretty much in-house training, but probably three-quarters of them have some variety of formal training at the moment and the others in house. Some do TAFE courses as they're working and roll along that way as well.

The CHAIR: Do you think that works for you as a practice in terms of getting that right experience and skills for that position or would you like something more formalised?

GREG POWELL: It has worked for us so far. I think TAFE probably trains—even in Inverell we're getting inquiries all the time from people who are enrolling in TAFE courses. I think there are more students than there are ever going to be jobs available. We have a lot of kids around town who come and inquire about doing their training and we're already full. There are probably a lot more kids being trained—around here anyway—than there are jobs.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: One of the things we've heard of from witnesses all over New South Wales is that one of the reasons for the shortages is the fact that people just have no skills in terms of running a business or dealing with all of the personal and other issues. They're well skilled in terms of veterinary science but what they face all of a sudden is running their own business and they're trying to deal with all of the issues of dealing with difficult patients et cetera. I'm just wondering if you could talk us through if that is an issue for you. The fact that you do have a number of vets, is that something that isn't much of an issue? Can you talk to each other? How do you experience that?

GREG POWELL: I came from a rural background. I had a gap decade before I went back to school, and I've never lost any sleep at all over any of it. I think the biggest thing is we all talk to each other pretty well a lot and socialise a bit, and there are a lot of other people around town who have expertise in accountancy or whatever. HR is sometimes an issue if you get a difficult person to deal with, but the trick has always been to make sure they don't hang around for a long time. But our staff retention also reflects that if you make sure you've got the right people, you don't have those problems too often. I'm sort of fairly quiet on a lot of the vet discussion groups and so forth because I don't lift my head up above the pulpit because my experience is very different to a lot of others so I just stay quiet most of the time. This is probably the first time anyone has heard me say much about practices today because I don't have the same experience as a lot of others, so I keep quiet most of the time.

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: Can I make comment on that as well?

GREG POWELL: Go hard, please.

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HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: As I said, this is coming from friends who are my age who have taken on jobs and bought businesses and things like that quite regionally, this practice is very different in the way that we have the supports. We have each other to back. We have discussions all the time. There is so much support and we're very lucky in that. There are a lot of people that aren't lucky, and certainly regionally, and I think that probably comes down to the fact of staffing. As I said, we're lucky in that but I know a friend of mine who is struggling to keep vets and she has to do everything. She has to be the vet, she has to be the practice manager, she has to be the accounts. She has to do everything, and so it's just all firing at you basically. I haven't been in a position of owning a practice yet ever, so I can't comment too much on that, but I think it comes down to the support that you've got, and we're very lucky.¹

GREG POWELL: The lady who was here talking before was talking about child care, and that is a big issue rurally. It's an issue in our practice as well because obviously there are a lot of ladies in the practice who have issues with child care. Matt, the other vet, who has a day off today, his wife is a solicitor and they're having a real struggle with child care. It's a very definite issue, and in the past probably the last vet who had three kids who was with us is Kim. She has moved to Queensland with her husband. It was a constant battle for child care to make that happen. I just want to reinforce that probably for every single person in rural areas, child care is a major issue.

Especially with ours, we're lucky; we divide it all up so we're not on call very often. But obviously kids get sick during the day, and then if you've got jobs booked out where you've got to drive an hour, an hour and a half, to a job, be there all day and come back, what do you do? It's difficult. While we have a lot of support within the clinic, that child care thing that you were talking about your friend having is a major issue across all regional areas for everyone, and certainly all our staff as well have big problems with child care. We've just got the numbers to be able to back each other up.

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: Yes, the numbers to back each other, and that's the thing, if you had the vets in the regional area, obviously that shortage and picking the right candidates to go through the degrees to find themselves out in those regional communities to just have more support through the vets.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Dr Borrowdale?

GLEN BORROWDALE: I don't really have an answer to your question, but I don't know an industry that has to put so many different hats on within the same building. The amount of different things that we're asked to do as veterinarians in work every day—we're radiographers and we've got to read bloods, emotional support, we're psychologists; you name it. We're talking to the person probably 50 per cent of the time that we're treating with the patient, whether it be large or small. You go through drought, we're talking to farmers. It's all stress. But as far as running the business goes, that's another hat altogether. If you're not able to run any business, veterinary is going to be way more hard, because you have to then manage all the stresses on top that are coming at you. Plus, it's very hard to become a business owner without still being a vet, because that's the income stream for the building. Therefore, you have to juggle all that together. Most regional vets aren't that big on vet number because of the demographic of available work, which makes it even more pressured because you've got the after-hours component on top of all of that, let alone the child care and everything. Put all that together, and you have pretty much a car crash.

I think the feedback you're getting is just a big network of a tough industry, and sometimes resilience is one of those things that should be targeted to get the right people in the right job. I watch the student intakes and I see high marks going for veterinary. I couldn't get in there; there's no way I could have got in there. I haven't struggled as a vet, but I couldn't get in at the start because there's no way I could have got the marks. But with some degree of testing or resilience, or even a conversation with a panel prior to entry, you can fish out someone who has an ability to speak or has some resilience before you get to the point of no return and then they're out in the industry and struggling. Once you've been in the industry a while, you get to the practice ownership position. If the person that has got to that point wants to buy a business, without some degree of business knowledge or resilience they're bound to fail. That's any industry. But I don't have a solution; I just have a comment, really.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: In terms of the other vets that you've spoken to in regional communities, what are the reasons, if they have left the profession, that they've given you?

GREG POWELL: I probably speak more to the vets who are in the profession. My opinion—I've got opinions on everything—is you need to be profiling the vets who are in regional practice who are still there and

¹ In [correspondence](#) received 10 March 2024, Dr Hannah Fotheringham, Inverell Veterinary Clinic, clarified the evidence given.

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are working in there. They're the people you need to be looking at. I'm afraid the academics in university are not those people. There might be a few. There are exceptions to every case. But I think every single person who is in rural practice and stays there is a particular variety of person, and that's the profile you need to be looking at if you're going to get people to stay in rural practice. They're the sort of people you need to look at—who's there now.

There's a multitude of people out there who are there and have been there for a long time. Some of them are really struggling because they're in small towns by themselves and can't get staff to help them. But you need to look at the sort of person they are, and that's the sort of person you need to be looking for. It's not someone necessarily with the highest GPA. How do you measure intelligence? Are we measuring just academic intelligence, practical intelligence, emotional intelligence or adaptive intelligence? There are a lot of different ways to measure intelligence. Unfortunately, the universities seem to focus on one area, and I'm afraid a lot of universities are full of people whose intelligence balls are all in the academic basket. That's the sort of people they're targeting. We're not targeting enough the people with all those other varieties of adaptability, resilience, and practicality. That's one of my opinions.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Do either of you have any additional views?

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: I've got a few people who have left the industry from my year. Burnout is probably one of the reasons—where they're just done. They just can't do it anymore. They were all probably regional as well. I'd say the support, again, is probably the reason why they haven't been able to stick it out, where they're on their own and having to deal and basically copping it. That's one thing. It's hard to stay regionally if you're not from there or have the support networks in the community either. It's tough at times and support is probably the biggest thing.

GLEN BORROWDALE: I don't know many who have left the industry personally but, from what I hear, people who are leaving the industry are usually leaving for burnout reasons or they have had little work break. I don't know how you fix that because if you've got a small town with two vets but there's a set amount of work, I don't know how you change that because it's a small business model. You can't change the business model; it's a private business. That is one of the things and how someone operates a business, like you were talking about before. If they choose to hire someone and then go on holidays for a month because they've got an extra body, that body might not be up to standard to last a month on their own or with minimal help. There's just minimal help sometimes and no-one to turn to. Some people move, particularly new grads. They might not have a partner or a family close. They're worried about financial things as well, in the back of their mind.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: One of the things that we heard raised previously in the evidence that we've taken in this inquiry is the issue of lay people, in effect, cannibalising bits of work—dentistry and pregnancy tests and other things—that then make their practices unviable. Do you have a view about that? Is that a good thing that they're doing these bits of work or is it something that needs to be regulated?

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: I might have a different opinion to these guys.

GREG POWELL: Fire away.

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: I'd say that the reason clients are turning to them is because they're available and they're probably cheaper than we are. They probably don't understand that they're not getting the whole package and they're probably not understanding that, at times, it can be detrimental to the animal that they've got. I'd say education is probably a big one there. But, at the end of the day, the shortage is probably the reason why they're getting a leg in to start with. For me, the shortage is opening that little window there and getting them to get a stake in. That is my point of view.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Do you have a different point of view?

GREG POWELL: I pretty much agree entirely with Hannah. When I first started here, it was a two-vet practice. Basically that translates into you getting two nights off and every second weekend off. Otherwise you're working 24 hours a day. There are quite a few lay operators around here doing dentistry and so forth. I don't know if you've come across Oliver Liyou yet, down at the coast with the dentistry? He's probably worth contacting. He has done a lot of work with getting vets trained up and systems in place for vets to be trained in dentistry. So I went and did that. We now have Hannah, Tom, Charles and myself who have all done those courses.

There were quite a few preg testers around here, and they were purporting to be really good at it by using ultrasound scanners. They weren't that great, so I thought we would just go and buy that. So we've got five of those machines now and a lot of people accredited in that space. I think the only way to tackle it is to take the work up to them, but there are a lot of people who are very skilled in those fields. Having done a bit of that sort of stuff in my gap decade, yes, you know a bit about it and you can do it—you have maybe a cattle person's

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background or a horse person's background, so you can talk the talk—but you're not operating at the same level. They're getting a leg in by being good communicators and available, when sometimes people aren't. But some of the stuff they're doing—I can speak from personal experience—is pretty dodgy. And some of it is very dodgy, because they haven't got the training.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: So you think it should be regulated? There should be some policing to stamp that out?

GREG POWELL: I don't know how you do that. I think there should be some regulation, yes, but I don't know how you go about doing it. But it's a definite problem.

GLEN BORROWDALE: Particularly if you start talking about welfare and anatomy.

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: Yes.

GLEN BORROWDALE: If you're putting things inside an animal without a full understanding of where it's going and the anatomy that could be involved, then you could argue your training isn't at the standard for that job. But, once again, how you regulate that—you can preg test with an ultrasound scanner.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: These people are advertising, so it's open. They're, in effect, brazen in the way that they advertise their services and say they use anaesthetics and other drugs that are effectively poisons that they shouldn't be allowed to utilise. I'm wondering why the Animal Welfare League or the RSPCA aren't prosecuting these people if they're engaging in that sort of activity.

GREG POWELL: I am wondering the same, yes. I think the same as you: Why aren't they? We seem to be very highly regulated.

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: Yes, exactly.

GREG POWELL: Someone's watching over our shoulder all the time and yet the competition can do—

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: What they want, when they want.

GREG POWELL: How they want.

GLEN BORROWDALE: Yes.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: We've spoken of how attracting vets away from cities to regional areas can be difficult and some of the reasons in terms of the loss of professional services in the regions and in the country areas. If you could maybe touch on the closure of banks and the impact that that's having in terms of attracting city people to the regions and the absence of those services? What are we seeing?

GREG POWELL: Doesn't affect me at all.

GLEN BORROWDALE: I couldn't imagine it does. They're not coming for those services. They're coming for the industry, more than anything, and the lifestyle of being in the country.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Okay.

GLEN BORROWDALE: If the city person is coming to the country, they're not looking at the banks; they're looking at the job they're going to. And, yes, they're going to look at the town and look at what it's got available. You know, if you've got your town with a population of 500, that's completely different to 13,000. So I'd be surprised if that's even a blip on their radar.

GREG POWELL: I last walked into a bank maybe four or five years ago. I don't know about you guys, but everything's online nowadays, and cards and even taking out loans and stuff.

The CHAIR: They're never open.

GREG POWELL: I haven't even met the bankers that organised my loans face to face. I have no idea what they look like. I have a cattle property that has been bought through a bank. I've never seen the people that have done that. We are all the time leasing stuff, borrowing money. I haven't walked into a bank for years.

GLEN BORROWDALE: I would put your childcare services above the bank.

GREG POWELL: Yes—by a long way.

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: But that also will come down to—in a regional area, it's not just child care, as well; it's doctors.

GLEN BORROWDALE: Yes.

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HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: Like, it's across the board. I'm sure it's in a lot of industries and things, but I think you've got to somewhat incentivise vets to be here. I think that that's probably where—or, in my opinion, that would be a potential solution to keep vets in regional; yes, incentivising them potentially, whether it be tax incentives or something like that to try and take a little bit of pressure off the small business practice owners who, if they want to pay their vets well, they've got to put the prices up for their clients and then the clients can't afford it. In my opinion, I think that might be an option to try and incentivise vets, if you could help that way, maybe.

GREG POWELL: Back to your bank question, I think other services are more important, like access to health, access to child care.

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: Yes.

GREG POWELL: All that sort of stuff's far higher on the radar than access to banks is, I think.

GLEN BORROWDALE: A financial comment on the tax, though, is a non-selective regional-based cash incentive to stay in the country, which could help. Whether it does, I don't know. I've never seen it; but, you know, I've read some things around HECS payments to get students in. I think your selection criteria is probably more important than a financial return, but it obviously would help new grads get going and potentially put a foothold in a country town that they go to.

GREG POWELL: I think focusing on city kids to come to rural areas—you probably need to be more focusing on getting the people who are from rural areas to be able to do the training, rather than focusing on trying to drag people away from a city lifestyle to go rurally. I think you're probably better off focusing on the people who are already orientated in that direction. I think, if you go and look at all the rural practices, there's only one—Georgia is a city girl. The other seven vets are all from rural areas.

GLEN BORROWDALE: As Greg said, if you look at the people who are still there and have been there for many years, if you were to go back to their teenage years or somewhere in the past, you'll find a long history of some sort of interest in animals—rural or something. You won't find straight, non-stop, Sydney-based, "I might just go to regional now". There will be something there to pick up, to target better, I would think. How you do it, I don't know.

The CHAIR: Do you think some sort of—I hate to use the word "quota", but some sort of allocation from the university level of X percentage of placements should be reserved for just rural people, or some sort of—

GREG POWELL: No. I think you need to approach it from a different direction. I think quotas—I never agree with quotas on anything.

The CHAIR: Yes. I'm generally not a fan.

GLEN BORROWDALE: They just get filled.

GREG POWELL: I think you just need to be looking at the sort of profile, the sort of person, you need. Why is Hannah in a rural practice? Well, probably, pretty much you're from Gloucester-Taree way; pony club as a girl; went mustering, doing horsey stuff on the farms around that area; so, straightaway, there's your profile. Gap decade rurally; Glen's off a farm; Matt's off a farm; Tom's from Toowoomba, grew up in a vet clinic but a farming background; Charlie's from a farm; Sarah's from Coffs Harbour, went to school in Coffs Harbour, horsey, rural orientated, has worked in St George for a few years. If you look at the profile of the people, I mean, looking around—I don't know, but—

The CHAIR: Just more targeting from the universities at those sorts of people?

GLEN BORROWDALE: Yes.

GREG POWELL: If you're wanting to get people to work rurally, you need to look at the profile of the people that you're selecting to take into uni in the first place, I think.

GLEN BORROWDALE: The universities are the ones selecting the students, so a quota's not going to make them or incentivise them to do that, but having some incentive for them to pick this student over this student—I don't know how you do that within that system.

GREG POWELL: Profile.

The CHAIR: Like a subsidy—given that the cost of the courses is quite expensive, some sort of subsidy that would make it attractive.

GLEN BORROWDALE: Yes, but the subsidy to the student isn't going to get the uni to select them, so there's going to have to be something—

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The CHAIR: A subsidy to the uni.

GLEN BORROWDALE: —for the university as well, yes; otherwise, they'll just pick whoever they want to get the marks or the grades.

GREG POWELL: I think they focus purely on academia.

GLEN BORROWDALE: That's right, yes.

GREG POWELL: And there's a lot of other skills in the world apart from just straight academia.

The CHAIR: Yes.

GREG POWELL: They need to look at the profile. If you want to select more for people to go rurally, you need to look at what sort of profile or person that is. And you still need the academic, I'm sorry. You've got to have the academic ability, but rating one person ahead of another by five points in the GPA doesn't look at all the other criteria. At the moment, the cut-offs are based on a very few points, whereas if you had a whole lot of other criteria to fulfil as well, you could very easily shift towards people without cutting down the academic ability too much.

The CHAIR: In the last five minutes we have, do you want to have a final spray in terms of anything else that you've missed, or anything desperately you think you need to get on the record?

GREG POWELL: Not from me, anyway; otherwise, you'd be here all day, if you want comments from me.

GLEN BORROWDALE: The key points for me are the selection criteria for students focusing on not just academics, because you'll miss people that can hold a communication in a country town and be involved. They'll be very clever people but, on average, you're going to miss the country orientation return. You'll just clearly miss it. The other component, I suppose, would be, to have them stay in the country, some sort of tax rebate for veterinarians in regional country towns like you see for schooling and those sort of things. That certainly would help.

HANNAH FOTHERINGHAM: I agree with Glen as well. I think the long-term solution is probably picking your candidates in the unis. That's obviously five or six years down the track, though, because they're not graduating now; and then, in the meantime, looking at incentivising people to stay regionally—the more people you have regionally, the more support people have and hopefully the more that they want to stay and have better networks; more money into the communities; more child care, potentially; and hopefully a snowballing effect from there. Complex—it's not that simple.

The CHAIR: No problems. Thank you very much for taking some time out of your day. We obviously appreciate it. We know that you're very busy. That's obviously what we're inquiring about. Thank you very much for your time. It is much appreciated.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

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Mr SAM BAKER, Local Community Member, sworn and examined

Mr HENRY BURRIDGE, Primary Producer, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. I suggest that we disregard all those formalities that we just saw and let's just treat this like a normal conversation. Did any of you guys want to make an opening statement before we get to questions?

SAM BAKER: Not so much an opening statement but just probably a bit of backgrounding on myself for the Committee which probably informs why I'm sitting here, and I'm more than happy to assist Matt and Hannah Pope in this forum. As well as being a beef cattle producer, I'm a bit of a Scotch mixture of doing things. I'm also the owner-operator of 118 bed high-care residential aged-care facility at Maclean, between Grafton and Yamba, and also deputy chair of Attract Connect Stay, Glen Innes, which is a not-for-profit specifically geared towards trying to attract GPs and allied health to the district. So obviously your forum here is a complete companion piece to those enterprises. I spend a lot of my time grappling with workforce attraction and retention in rural/regional areas.

HENRY BURRIDGE: I'm a family farm manager, Dundee. I'm probably the same as Sam, just here to support the local vet from a rural background, I suppose. That whole industry is integral to us as farm operators from an animal point of view, obviously. But the way everything is going with more technology and your ability to be more accurate and get your timing better with things like preg testing or just day-to-day running of livestock, it's important that we have strong vets in our area. In our area at the moment we're quite blessed to have a good group of vets and a good vet clinic but I'm probably concerned about where it goes, like in maybe five or 10 years' time, as all these vets get older and look at retirement—and not only that, but probably the current stresses that they have on them, which probably all rural facets are probably dealing with. They're my concerns or things to think about.

The CHAIR: Mr Baker, based on what you said there about your work in trying to attract allied health and GPs and obviously retain them in the area, is there anything from that line of work in your experience that has worked that could be transferrable to the veterinary profession? Obviously, we're still grappling with that as an issue, attracting medical professions, but is there—

SAM BAKER: For sure. It was interesting hearing the commonality of the earlier witnesses, presenters, whatever we call them, because it's the same challenge that any operation—whether it's vet, aged care, education, law enforcement are struggling once you clear the Great Dividing Range. There's just a disconnect. My wife works at the local Catholic primary school over at Glen Innes. I was speaking with her principal. His droll commentary—and I'd suggest it's probably very prevalent in all walks of life—was, "If you wanted to get a teacher between the coast and the Great Dividing Range, you're spoilt for choice. If you're trying to get a teacher to move over the Great Dividing Range, they would rather go be a barista." We obviously love Glen Innes as a district, but my tongue-in-cheek commentary is there's a lot more people who'd rather ring up Elon Musk and say, "Send me to Mars," than move to a Glen Innes or an Inverell. That intrigues me because Glen Innes and Inverell are relatively civilised parts of the State, as we know. I just feel sorry for people who have got the same challenge out at a Walgett or a Bourke or a far flung.

Sorry, but to answer your question, picking up on the earlier presenters, I think incentivising people—and, again, with my own aged-care operation we're now looking at expensive options but options we've got to consider nonetheless, such as for a prescribed tour of duty, extinguishing people's HECS debts, offering relocation packages, offering sign-on bonuses. But, like Matt and Hannah's operation, it's all got to come off your bottom line. That can obviously then affect the price point of your services. There's no magic bullet to it, but it is this challenge that, as I say, is not just in the vet space. It's very rare that I speak to a regional employer and just ask, being nosy, as I am, how they're going for staff—if I walked down the main street here at Inverell, there'd be a shortfall of staff.

The CHAIR: In terms of incentives, do you think we also need something in that mid to later part of a person's career to keep them in a regional area, like a long-service incentive to retain them? Or do you think that once people realise that Inverell is quite civilised, they're quite happy?

SAM BAKER: It's quite civilised. It's not as civilised as Glen Innes, obviously. We're a bit higher up the hill. I think everything is up for consideration is the short answer. I mean, the good old throwaway line was, whether it was new vets or the stock and station agent or the school teacher, they'd find a partner and sink some roots down in the local district. But it's also, from my own experience, a bit of a change in thought process as an employer. Putting a lot of time and effort into securing someone that you may only have for two or three years, historically that's been why you'd go through the effort. Whereas in 2023 you've got to probably change thinking

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to go, if you get three good years out of a bright, up-and-coming vet or a school teacher or an aged-care worker, and they move on to greener pastures, while that is somewhat frustrating and demotivating, you've got to be clear-eyed about the employment environment we're operating in.

Also, just picking up on the earlier speakers, we've got the same dynamic in aged care in that in aged care we're relying on our staff to treat it as a vocation and a passion. That's sorting the problem out to a degree but, further to the commentary about, "Well, most of the country vets are coming from the country," it's about giving—I've got children rolling out of high school considering vet because it's got a compelling attraction to it, not that they are animal lovers or off a farm. I'm coming at it just from a commercial angle.

The CHAIR: Mr Burridge, do you have anything to add to that?

HENRY BURRIDGE: I actually think there's a bigger problem too. There's a grassroots problem. Just as an example, I heard out at Coonamble High School—I don't know the full particulars or details—they're closing down the ag section out there. And I just look at education these days, and I just think, in rural areas especially, those ag departments of schools should be given, probably, a bit more respect or a bit more light, because I think, like the vets were saying before we were up here, most of these people that go into vet have got a background. They're coming from a horse thing, or they've had animals when they were young. I feel like, if people are going to school and they're learning whatever the curriculums may be or whatever they learn, if they're not getting exposure to these animals or things are revolving around that, how are you going to expand that pool where vets can come from? I say more focus in those rural areas, because, inevitably, most of the people that come and work there have come from there. Trying to drag people out of the city, you'll get the odd one, but everyone in Australia wants to live on the eastern seaboard. Everyone's got an obsession with the ocean, I suppose.

But it worries me. Even myself when I was at school—and I think of all the lessons I learn, and some of the most valuable things that I learned in there were actually not trigonometry and maths. It was more when we talked about starting up business in business studies. I remember, in one class, one of the teachers was just showing us to write cheques and things. Obviously, they're irrelevant now, but it's just that stuff that was real life and in things that you actually need to know now. I think that can apply.

The CHAIR: Maybe some more investment or resources put into schools being able to deliver those sort of cert III in agricultural services and primary industries that expose more kids to that way or that vocation?

HENRY BURRIDGE: Definitely. Even from my own point of view, I talked to some of the staff in at the high school in town because of I'm always hungry to get help, I guess. But I'm also happy to do some minor education. It's good. I'm glad they've got it. But they have the thing where the students can come and work one day a week on your farm. I actually enjoy that. I actually enjoy—not that everything I'm going to do is going to be right or wrong—having those guys there and getting them keen, because I feel like, if we don't have—numbers is power. The more people you have, the better you're going to be. Like I said, just having that exposure to rural life or animals—and then it can spread different ways. They could go into farming, or they could go into vet, or they could go into even the thoroughbred industry. It's the same sort of thing. It all revolves back to the same thing initially.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: If I could just pick that up, Mr Burridge. I was just reflecting—this is probably showing my age on this. Many years ago, a lot of sort of high school kids used to come out to the country and do sort of jillarooing or jackarooing. Are we seeing that today in terms of giving these young people some sort of hands-on experience in terms of agriculture in the regions and opening their eyes to what might be out there?

HENRY BURRIDGE: Probably not. Most of it's probably based, like everything in the world—insurance and safety, I think. That's a big hold-back. Farms are pretty dangerous places if you haven't got your wits about you—no different than being a vet, I guess. You're dealing with animals. I was watching a video the other day, with vets pulling cats out of their baskets with welding gloves. Things can go pretty wrong, pretty quickly. I just think a lot of that stuff doesn't happen enough anymore. It's such a good experience. Even when I talked about Coonamble High School before—sometimes some of these kids in schools don't respond well to teachers and authority and that stuff. But sometimes you bring an animal into it—animals can't speak. To get that animal to do what you want or behave a certain way, you have to dull yourself down and adapt. And I feel like some kids respond really well to that. That comes into it. And that jackarooing sort of thing—you go off; say you go up to the Territory or something like that. You're getting thrown in an isolated place where you've got to learn to be independent, and you have so much you could gain. It's like anything—trying to get people just to start. Once they're there, they're there. But it's always that step, I guess, which creates the trouble.

SAM BAKER: Also, just to answer your question—our second child just finished jackarooing down at Warren on a Egelabra sheep place there. That was a struggle, to find him a jackarooing berth in New South Wales.

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As Henry's referencing, northern Australia tends to be on trend in the pathway. Being a bit older than Henry—Henry probably wouldn't remember it—I'd suggest, just to date-stamp it, the last jackaroo in Glen Innes was the late eighties, early nineties, which was Waterloo. Used to have three. Even just the change in ag practices, where, again, in my youth, it was quite common for—we're not huge, really, on 720 hectares, but even an operation that size would have possibly had a retained worker, and that retained worker would have had a family and kids again getting exposed to ag, possibly interested in doing vet, whereas, in our district, it's got very skewed towards contract services and changes in practices, better equipment, labour-saving equipment. So the sort of external service providers have really taken over the jackaroo, station hand type role in our district. I'd only be guessing, but places with more than, say, two genuine jackaroos in New South Wales—if there was more than 20 in the State, I'd be very surprised.

HENRY BURRIDGE: I agree.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Are we seeing, in terms of seasonal workers, international students coming and participating in agricultural practices in terms of the change of farming now?

HENRY BURRIDGE: It's hard for me to speak on that because, I suppose, in our area, most of that stuff generally happens where you're growing fruit or harvest sort of stuff.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: More seasonal.

HENRY BURRIDGE: Where we are, and Inverell, to a degree, we're livestock-based operations. We do a little bit of farming. We grow some corn, some summer crops too, but it's not big enough, in relative terms. I was thinking about it the other day. We're still selling grain for the same price now. I was getting the same price for grain 10, 12 years ago. But you buy a new truck—it's two or three times the price. It just puts a squeeze on everything. COVID, obviously, caused some major troubles with that, but I have seen the odd backpackers and some foreigners looking for work. But, again, I don't know how much incentive there is to do that and the appetite for it, either. But it'd be good to have it; put it that way. We're getting off the topic of veterinary stuff a little bit.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I'm just wondering in terms of your broader experiences. We've heard that there's a shortage of vets when we go. But we've also heard that sometimes, given the nature of the industry, if additional vets came in, then that could lead—you can't have two in the one township. There's just not the demand, even though the demand is so high. Do you think there really is a shortage of vets in regional New South Wales?

HENRY BURRIDGE: I feel like it mightn't seem like there's a shortage, but it's such a high-pressure industry. I was saying to Sam on the way over in the car, you're basically dealing with negativity—not much different than a nurse or a doctor. You've got animals that are rarely coming in well. There's usually broken bones or snakebites. Not only that—the vets have to deal with the people too. Some people are realistic about animals. Us being farmers, I'm far more callous than what someone from the city would be—not in a bad way, obviously, but I just mean you've got to deal with their emotions nearly more so than the animal itself, and that's a lot of strain to put on. You've got a group of vets and I don't know what the average age of vets is, but, like I said, I'm happy with the number and the way the practice is in our area at the moment, but I'm concerned about where they come from.

I might be wrong, but years ago there would have been probably kids knocking on the door to come and get a job, and I'd be very surprised if it was many applicants coming at all now. This is the thing; you can look at the current but, like everything, if you don't have something underneath eventually the floor will collapse. You've got to have that. That's why I went to that school thing, because I just think it's so important to get these younger people—get it into their mind, or get them embedded around animals and things like that, young. And then that can start this process of them wanting to become vets again.

I've got a friend who's got a practice at Tenterfield. He is my age; I'm 39. Both his parents are doctors. Back when he was trying to become a vet, he didn't get a high enough UAI to get into a vet course in New South Wales. He actually had to go to Western Australia to become a vet. He is very—it's a passion for him. He loves his horses. I think he does endurance racing with horses in his spare time. But that's what has got him through. It's his pure passion and the love for the animals; it wasn't his academia or his pure intelligence. He's just driven to become a vet. Like I said, if we can broaden that pool, that stuff will come. I feel like that pool is small. I think in some places the vets might be alright; in other places, no, I think there would be a shortage for sure. Or there will be anyway, without a doubt.

SAM BAKER: We can only give you the feedback from Glen Innes. I'm, as I said earlier, very much here on behalf of Matt and Hannah, who run a great operation. I want them to continue running that great operation for as long as they want to do it. Again, being nosy and because it's very close to home for me, I do note with their own operation that they've got the classic example of at first blush there's a lot of vets on the books but they've

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got one gentleman who is probably in the shadows of retirement and, throttling back, they've got other part-timers. Again, from the outside looking in, Matt and Hannah and their crew are doing a very good duck impersonation in that above the waterline, from a customer perspective and looking outward, it all looks pretty shipshape but below the waterline those legs are pedalling probably much harder than I think is healthy for them.

As you'd all know, one of vets' major negatives, just from what I've read and seen, is the endemic mental health issues within vet, which I see linked to, as Henry said, dealing with a very psychologically charged environment, long work hours, and constant challenges in that space. I've come over here very much looking just to flag Hannah and Matt's workflow and burnout—warning lights in my mind's eye. So to answer your question, I think there are not enough vets. It might present that but it's like—getting back to our doctor's surgery at Glen Innes where, if you moved to Glen Innes, you'd be past number 400 on the waiting list. They need two GPs to satisfy that waiting list, which they are working on. Again, from the outside looking in, that surgery has got a lot of doctors but, if you boil it down to full-time equivalents, they've got about three.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Is it a fair summary then to say that many of the issues that have been raised are issues that affect everyone in rural communities, not just vets? Is that really what you're saying? Then on top of that vets have these particular problems—mental health, the stress of the work and so on? Is that a fair characterisation?

HENRY BURRIDGE: Yes, it is. I suppose more on the importance of the vets is, I feel like, most of these areas are—the income coming into them, if it's not mining, it's agriculture. Like I said, an integral part of our operation is having good vets. Because we get problems with animals, livestock, dead stock. There are always going to be issues and you're always going to need them. Then, if we're trying to push out production, obviously through things like ultrasound, and as technology and things get better and we try to fine-tune everything that we do, the better quality vets and the more vets we have, the better we can do that, the more money we can make, the more tax—the more money that stays in town, the better these communities go.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: In summary, you're saying that you're more likely to retain people as vets in a community like yours if they come from that community in the first place. If it's easier for people to get into study at university—people who have the level of academic qualification but not in a competitive sense with such a high ATAR—if it's open to more people that come from this community in the first place, they're more likely to come back and stay as a vet. Is that right?

SAM BAKER: I think so. I'm going to have to defer to our predecessors who were sitting here with their own staff. Yes, to both of those. I think the challenges of attracting people, as I say, over the other side of the great divide is—

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Why do you think they don't want to come and work here? Do you think opening it up to people from overseas to come and work as vets—people trained in China and Indonesia and other places—would make a difference?

HENRY BURRIDGE: Potentially but, like I said, I still think there are fundamental issues with the education system. I just think whatever is happening there—I mean, Sam and I were both very privileged to go away to school in Sydney when we were young and that was great. But I just remember our whole focus was completely on academia and getting the highest UAI possible and it just didn't—there are other things to it. I didn't have any exposure to animals there. I know some of those schools now have got ag departments and things like that, because you want those high-end vets. You want a good broad spectrum. The more people you can pull from, the better everything will be. It's just making those areas more attractive.

But, yes, it does come back to things like health care and stuff like that. But I just don't know with the overseas thing. To a degree it can work, I suppose, because there are people that come over here from less privileged countries and Australia looks like a dream to them, I guess. But then they've got to fit in too and that can be hard. Moving to a country area that's foreign to you can be difficult. I don't know the answers sometimes. You think you can solve something or you just do this or that. I just know it all comes from the base. If the base can be improved, I feel like everything can go on.

SAM BAKER: Again, there are statistics floating around on all fronts obviously, but I think it tracks at about 60-odd per cent of people in Australia have never stepped foot on a farm. There's a major dynamic there that it's just a foreign land. The overseas worker avenue—I've just gone through the lived experience of doing something that five years ago I would've sworn blind that I will never do in that I've—and very happy that we've done it—secured two Filipino nationals as registered nurses to work for my aged-care business. But, again, it all comes off the bottom line and that was a horrendously laborious, complicated, expensive process. And there's an on-cost there.

CORRECTED

Without knowing the ins and outs of Hannah and Matt's business, even if that avenue was available, they may well sit down and go, "Well, by the time we pay for that process, we're actually going backwards", or, "It's costing us a small fortune." And I don't know—at least with that registered nurse pathway, the recognition and the conversion of an overseas qualification is relatively straightforward. I can't imagine it would be in the vet space. You hear anecdotally the Uber drivers who are qualified engineers, but to get their overseas engineering ratified they've basically got to start their tertiary process again. So it's a very, very vexed issue. Why people don't want to move to regional areas—I think it's probably fear of the unknown as much as anything.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time. I think it's very valuable that we hear not only from the vets but obviously from the other side as well in terms of the customer in some cases. We appreciate your broad experience.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 11:15.