AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY WORKFORCE PLANNING

ESSENTIAL FOR OUR FUTURE
THE FUTURE OF VETERINARY SERVICES IN AUSTRALIA IS AT RISK, UNLESS WE ACT NOW

The problem

Veterinarians are critical for the protection of Australia’s animal, human and community health and wellbeing. Rural and regional veterinarians ensure the safety of the food we eat and export, and care for the health and welfare of livestock. They are essential to our biosecurity, helping identify and respond to serious disease outbreaks, as well as looking after animals in natural disasters.

Veterinarians are also important to the two-thirds of households with pets, who are increasingly valued as important family members. There is a significant body of evidence that pet ownership has benefits for the health and wellbeing of individuals, the community and the economy.

However, the future sustainability of the veterinary workforce is currently at risk. The Australian veterinary workforce modelling report clearly shows that unless changes are made, Australia will experience a significant oversupply of veterinarians, with supply exceeding demand by more than 50% by 2025.

Alongside supply issues, veterinary graduates’ debts are increasing and their income is sinking. There is evidence that the oversupply is starting to affect the income of new graduates with data obtained from the Graduate Careers Australia website showing a starting salary for veterinary graduates at only $46,500. When looking at rankings according to starting salary for bachelor degree graduates veterinarians have fallen from 6th rank in 1996 to 20th rank in 2014 out of the 22 fields of education undertaken as bachelor degrees. More significant is other data from the same website that shows a 14.5% increase in veterinary graduates not in full time work four months post-graduation over the same period.

The average total income for veterinarians in 2012-13 was $79,152 compared those with similar degrees such as dentists $144,749 and medical GPs $153,700.

Most veterinary qualifications now take 6 years rather than 5 years to complete increasing the student debt by over 20% in what is now one of the most expensive degrees to obtain.

What is clear is that economic, demand, and supply forces are converging into a perfect storm of future unsustainability in one of Australia’s essential professions. We simply can’t afford to continue with a business-as-usual approach.

Coordinated, long-term reforms are needed to secure a sustainable and affordable veterinary workforce capable of maintaining high quality veterinary care into the future. Governments, the profession and higher education providers all have a role to play.
What needs to be done?

A clever, cooperative approach across multiple sectors is the only option to address this complex problem. There is no easy solution. The profession, the government and universities must accept that the responsibility to ensure the future of veterinary services lies with all of us.

**Australian government**

- **A moratorium on any new veterinary schools**
  No federal funding should be allocated for new veterinary schools or the expansion of facilities that are designed specifically to enable a university to increase the intake of veterinary degree students.

- **Limit the number of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) for veterinary degrees**
  The Minister should specify that the veterinary degree should be a designated course of study under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*, clause 30-12(2) and to limit the number of allocated CSP places. This will save taxpayer money, and ensure graduates are able to use their expensive degrees to build a satisfying career.

- **Adequate federal funding of veterinary schools**
  A veterinary student loading equivalent to the medical student loading should be introduced under the Commonwealth Grants Scheme. Veterinary schools need to provide students with training in teaching hospitals similar to that needed by medical students to allow registration as a veterinary practitioner. Introducing this loading will go part way to addressing the underfunding of veterinary schools as identified in the Kemp Norton Review of the Demand Driven Funding System.

- **Limit increases in veterinary degree student fees**
  Proposed deregulation of fees will lead to debt levels for veterinarians which may mean a negative return on their investment. To ensure this doesn’t occur, fees must be capped so as to limit the ratio of debt to gross average starting salary to less than 1.5:1.

- **Remove veterinarian from the Skilled Occupation List**
  The forecasted oversupply demonstrates there is no skill shortage so the occupation ‘veterinarian’ should be removed from the Skilled Occupation List.

**State governments**

- **A moratorium on any new veterinary schools**
  No state government funding should be allocated for new veterinary schools or the expansion of facilities that are designed specifically to enable a university to increase the intake of veterinary degree students.

- **Ensure a sustainable government veterinary workforce into the future**
  The workforce modelling report shows clearly that we are heading towards a significant undersupply of government veterinarians, the only sector of the profession where this is the case. Governments need to be proactively employing and training younger graduates to fill the gap as older government veterinarians retire, and government should also be investing in the development and retention of those already working in government roles to ensure their expertise is not lost. These roles are critical to biosecurity, food safety and our agricultural industries. There is particular concern over an impending shortage of trained veterinary pathologists to work in government animal health laboratories.

- **Make veterinary workforce data collection a role of veterinary registration boards in all states and territories**
  Workforce planning in the human health professions is made possible through the collection of workforce data as part of the registration process. To ensure Australia has the right number of veterinarians in the right locations, this data collection should be a role of veterinary boards as part of the registration process.
Universities

- **Continued cross-subsidisation of veterinary schools**
  Universities should continue to cross-subsidise veterinary schools to allow fees to remain commensurate with veterinary incomes. The cost of training a veterinary graduate is among the highest, however there is a strong argument that the degree should continue to be cross-subsidised by universities due to potential lifetime earnings and the public good veterinarians fulfil.

- **Limit the number of places in veterinary degrees**
  In a degree where there is almost an unlimited number of applicants, universities need to ensure they are not unethically capitalising on student desire by basing student intake on factors other than the need for new veterinarians in the workforce.

- **Limited increases in veterinary degree student fees**
  There are concerns that deregulation of fees will lead to debt levels for veterinarians which may mean a negative return on their investment. To ensure this doesn’t occur, fees must be capped so as to limit the ratio of debt to gross average starting salary to less than 1.5:1.

- **Better information for prospective students**
  Universities should provide clear evidence-based career advice for those seeking to become a veterinarian, including the average salary, and career opportunities upon graduation.

The veterinary profession

- **Drive increased demand**
  The Australian Veterinary Association will be taking the lead on behalf of the profession as it evaluates the future needs of the Australian community for veterinary services. In addition to the existing need for veterinarians in biosecurity, food safety and food security roles, there will be a concerted effort to identify new and emerging roles where veterinarians can use their skills and training. The veterinary profession will also be seeking to make the profession more responsive to society’s needs.

Conclusion

Governments, universities, the professional body representing veterinarians and veterinarians themselves all need to act together to ensure the long-term success and health of the veterinary workforce. There is no one simple solution to the problem. However if all parties act now and in a coordinated way, potential serious consequences for Australia’s animals, farmers, public health and the economy can be avoided.