Foreword

Australia has been a leader in animal welfare. That leadership has been well-regarded globally and is significant for the animals in our homes and on our farms. It has been the basis for the confidence of Australians in our animal industries. But we won’t maintain that role unless the Australian Government resumes its national leadership and investment in animal welfare across all sectors.

This challenge forms the first of five themes for our policy platform for 2016. The World Organization for Animal Health made a number of similar recommendations to ours in its recent Report on the Evaluation of Veterinary Services of Australia.

The veterinary profession calls on the new Australian Government to work with us, animal industries and other governments, to help make these goals a reality. Together, we have the opportunity to make a positive difference to the lives of Australian animals, and ensure productive, sustainable animal industries well into the future.

Dr Robert Johnson, President
Australian Veterinary Association
Australian Government leadership on animal welfare

It would be hard to imagine a world without animals. The human-animal relationship is one of the foundations of our society. It has been a source of mutual benefit for thousands of years. Animals are integral to our way of life, and a source of food, fibre and companionship.

Animals are sentient beings that are conscious, feel pain, and experience emotions. They have intrinsic value and should be treated humanely by the people who benefit from them. The community as a whole understands this, and are increasingly demanding that the food and fibre people consume be sourced from production systems with high welfare standards. They expect their governments to take an active role in ensuring this occurs.

This is a role that the Australian Government did play until 2013 when funding for the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy was withdrawn. Since this time, there has been a fragmentation of this animal welfare framework. While some individual industries have continued to develop new approaches and products that improve animal welfare, the consensus approach we enjoyed in the past has slipped away.

The states and territories have had little incentive to step up their poorly-funded animal welfare activities, with cooperation and consensus among animal organisations declining substantially.

The Australian Government needs to dedicate resources to a new national framework. As demonstrated by the cost of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy, this can be achieved with as little as $1.2 million each year. This new framework will need to:

- Facilitate expert input and advice to governments from a broad range of perspectives
- Achieve incremental and sustainable improvements in animal welfare outcomes
- Harmonise animal welfare standards across jurisdictions.

High quality, harmonised animal welfare standards will increase consumer confidence in the welfare credentials of Australian livestock industries, and help to protect valuable export markets. As every livestock producer knows, happy and healthy livestock are productive livestock. High animal welfare standards build the bottom line.

Invest $1.2 million each year to develop and maintain a new national framework for animal welfare and provide leadership to the states and territories to promote ongoing improvements in animal welfare standards.

Better regulation of livestock export

The livestock export trade is currently enjoying considerable growth. It is essential that this growth does not come at the expense of the welfare of exported animals.

The Export Supply Chain Assurance Scheme (ESCAS) must not be watered down, and should instead be continually strengthened. The Australian Government has an important regulatory role to ensure sustainability and ongoing social licence for the industry. Breaches of ESCAS must be taken seriously with stronger sanctions imposed.

A truly independent veterinarian should be mandated on every live export shipment. This means a veterinarian who is not employed by the exporter, but is responsible for reporting the true state of affairs on journeys. This arrangement could be provided by the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources or an independent third party on a cost recovery basis from industry.

Veterinarians are also concerned about exporters cutting corners in relation to pregnancy diagnosis of exported cattle. Pregnant cows that are incorrectly diagnosed will suffer on board export vessels, and are likely to be rejected by the receiving country. Pre-export pregnancy diagnosis should only be conducted by an appropriately accredited veterinarian to minimise the risk of exporting pregnant cows in error.

- ESCAS should be reviewed regularly and animal welfare standards continuously improved over time
- ESCAS should mandate the engagement of a truly independent veterinarian on every live export vessel to monitor and report on animal health and welfare
- ESCAS should mandate that pre-export pregnancy diagnosis of cattle can only be undertaken by a registered veterinarian.
Fighting antimicrobial resistance

Antimicrobial resistance is a global issue and a threat to both animal and human health as essential treatments become less effective. It has been shown that antimicrobial resistance can be passed to humans through the food chain. While this is a significantly smaller risk in Australia than in many other nations, the veterinary profession accepts its responsibility to work alongside the human health professions to fight the development of resistance at every opportunity.

In 2015, the Australian Government released its first ever national strategy to combat antimicrobial resistance. It includes a number of priorities for action relating to antibiotic use in animals, as well as issues relating to veterinary practice such as infection prevention and control.

In 2016, the AVA embarked on a major project in partnership with Animal Medicines Australia. This three-year project will develop best-practice antibiotic prescribing guidelines for horses and the main livestock species.

The veterinary industry is acting, but more investment is needed from the Australian Government. We need better surveillance of antibiotic use and antimicrobial resistance in animals to learn where the biggest risks are to human health and what actions can be taken.

Other countries have different approaches to antibiotic use in animals than Australia has, and these practices can result in larger impacts on human health. We need to work globally to reduce the problem beyond Australia to make sure, for example, that travellers returning to Australia do not bring home antibiotic-resistant bugs.

Increase funding for surveillance of antibiotic use and resistance in animals, research into the risks to human health from use of antibiotics in animals, and the identification of alternatives for prevention and control of bacterial diseases in animals.

Disease surveillance and response

The movement of animals and people around the world has never been so rapid. In a single day, a person can wake on one side of the globe, and before the day is done, fall asleep on the other.

As towns and suburbs expand further into farming regions and bushland, we are living closer and closer to animals and impinging on their habitats. The risk of disease spread both to and from animals has never been greater, and we have seen this with emerging diseases such as Hendra and Lyssa viruses.

General disease surveillance is important to maintain Australia’s favourable animal health status and for the early detection of animal disease emergencies. Emergency animal diseases are a significant threat to animal industries. The equine influenza outbreak in 2007-08 cost Australian governments over $370 million in response activities and industry assistance. It also cost a further $1.5 billion in indirect costs to the horse industry and the Australian economy.

This is dwarfed by the prospect of a foot and mouth disease outbreak in Australia, which has been estimated as costing at least $7 billion and up to $16 billion depending on our ability to deal quickly with the outbreak. Effective disease surveillance and response capabilities will mean the difference between a manageable outbreak and a catastrophic impact on our important livestock industries.

At the same time, an outbreak of a disease such as rabies could have a significant impact on human health as well as animal health. This scenario would also come with a hefty price tag for governments.

High quality surveillance, biosecurity and quarantine systems are our only defense against disease outbreaks like these. Should there be an outbreak, effective response capability will be essential. And it is veterinarians who are on the frontline of biosecurity, disease surveillance and emergency response.

The AVA workforce modelling report showed, that while there is likely to be an oversupply of veterinarians in general, too few of these will be employed by governments. Unless current practices are changed, there will be a significant undersupply of government veterinary services.

Governments need to be proactively employing and training graduates to fill the gaps as older government veterinarians retire. Investment is also needed in the development and retention of those who are already working in government roles to ensure their expertise is not lost.

At the same time, there needs to be enhanced government funding of schemes which recruit private veterinary participation in disease surveillance and investigation. The existing National Significant Disease Investigation Program (NSDIP) needs to be strengthened to take advantage of the presence of private veterinarians on farms to undertake disease surveillance and investigations. Current funding through state departments is limited, and should be boosted as this scheme is crucial for the maintenance of Australia’s favourable animal disease status.

These veterinary roles, both public and private, are critical to biosecurity, food safety and the ongoing profitability of our agricultural industries.
Targeted investment in higher education

Where there are animals, there need to be veterinarians. Veterinarians are critical for safeguarding the health and welfare of Australia and our animals. They are uniquely qualified to ensure the safety of the food we eat, guard access to export markets, and care for those companion animals that are increasingly becoming genuine members of our families.

However, the future sustainability of the veterinary workforce is currently at risk from multiple directions. AVA modelling clearly shows that we are on a path to a significant oversupply of veterinarians within a decade. This comes at a time when veterinary careers themselves are becoming less sustainable as graduates face increasing education debts.

In short, investment in veterinary education is poorly targeted. This is resulting in a workforce that is growing at an unsustainable rate. Demand for veterinary services is not matching this growth in the workforce, and significant oversupply issues result. Veterinary education is one of the most expensive courses to deliver – better targeting will offer more efficient use of government resources.

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 for our animals into the future.

- A moratorium on any new veterinary schools and on the expansion of facilities that are designed specifically to enable a university to increase the intake of veterinary students
- A veterinary student loading equivalent to a medical student loading should be introduced under the Commonwealth Grants Scheme to ensure adequate levels of funding for veterinary schools
- Increases in veterinary degree student fees should be limited, and be in line with potential employment outcomes.

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) Ltd is the only organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 9000 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession – clinical practitioners, government veterinarians, those working in industry, research and teaching, and veterinary students.

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