Veterinarians: our health and agriculture depend on them

The Australian Veterinary Association
Federal election 2010 policy platform
Background

As the professional experts on animal health and welfare, veterinarians play an indispensable role in ensuring the health of Australians through their role in food safety and our biosecurity and quarantine systems. Veterinarians are vital contributors to our agricultural industries, helping farmers increase production and taking care of their animals’ health and welfare.

Veterinarians are also at the forefront of detection and response to animal diseases of all types. These include serious threats to our agricultural industries such as foot-and-mouth disease, diseases that cross between animals and humans such as Hendra virus, pathogens that can contaminate our food supply, and infectious diseases that harm valuable sporting, recreational and companion animals. They also play a vital role in ensuring the best possible outcomes for animal welfare and health in Australia.

There are around 9100 veterinarians registered to practise across Australia. Non-practising veterinarians (who may or may not be registered) work in commercial enterprises, research and teaching, and for government.

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the only national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 6300 members come from the full range of fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals (including cattle and sheep), and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical companies and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the association.

Biosecurity protection for animal industries

The equine influenza outbreak cost Australian governments at least $350 million in direct costs. It also cost an additional $1.5 billion in indirect costs to the horse industry and the nation.

There are many other threats from emergency animal diseases. Should Australia experience a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, the cost to the gross domestic product has been estimated to be between $8 billion and $13 billion in the first year. In addition to the response costs borne by governments and industry, an outbreak would take a massive toll on agricultural communities and businesses in rural and regional Australia. Disease threats to animals are serious and potentially expensive to the Australian economy and to people’s livelihoods.

The Beale Review into Biosecurity and Quarantine identified serious deficiencies in our national defences against animal and plant diseases and recommended that the Commonwealth increase its biosecurity investment by $260 million per annum. Some of this cost could be recovered. The Beale Review recommended another $225 million over several years for information technology (IT) infrastructure and an agreement with the states to link activities and ensure ongoing commitment to shared cooperation in biosecurity.

Recommendation

Commit to providing $260 million per annum to fund the recommendations of the Beale Review into Biosecurity and Quarantine.

Recommendation

Establish a National Agreement on Biosecurity to link border and post-border activities, and ensure commitment and contribution from the Commonwealth and all the states.

Recommendation

Commit a further $225 million from the Commonwealth Budget over a number of years for investment in IT systems and other infrastructure, as well as staff and training to support Australia’s biosecurity.
Responding to infectious diseases

Around 75% of new and emerging human diseases are zoonoses – diseases which can affect animals and humans and cross between them. These emerging threats include Hendra virus, Nipah virus, Menangle virus, highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

Many of these new diseases have emerged from wildlife, transferring into domestic animals and humans when native habitat is destroyed. It is expected that climate change and ongoing habitat destruction will lead to the continuing emergence of new diseases.

Effective responses to emerging disease threats require research and diagnosis, and close cooperation between animal and human health experts. The closure of the Australian Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre for Emerging Infectious Disease in June 2010 has made this vital cooperation much more difficult.

Despite a global push for coordinated responses to emerging health threats, the human and animal health sectors in Australia remain compartmentalised. This could be a disastrous situation should a new zoonosis emerge from Australia’s unique wildlife species or through increased global travel. Australia lies close to one of the world’s emerging disease ‘hot spots’ – South East Asia. It is becoming more likely than ever that a new disease will travel here from one of our regional neighbours.

Australia needs a new Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases based on collaboration between major animal and human research and diagnostic institutes. This initiative could significantly break down existing barriers to ensure effective recognition, control, research and treatment of such diseases. It would greatly increase our ability to respond effectively to a major outbreak of a new disease. The Centre would attract funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Council.

Australia has a unique government and industry cooperative arrangement to respond to emergency disease situations. The Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement is a deed which specifies the roles for government and an affected animal industry and outlines how the costs of an emergency disease response will be apportioned. All animal industries that might be involved in an emergency animal disease response (including zoonotic diseases) should be a party to this agreement, so that the taxpayer and the industry can share the costs of the response according to pre-set formulae.

Healthy communities

Food safety and security

Australia is helping to feed the world. With its reputation for safety and high quality, around two-thirds of Australia’s agricultural production is exported. Animal industries that produce food and fibre and other products will continue to play key roles in maintaining the nation’s economic wellbeing in the 21st century. At time of increasing population and decreasing food security, the safety of Australian animal produce is vital for the national economy and the health of Australians.

Animal Welfare

Veterinarians are best placed to ensure that the welfare of all animals is monitored and maintained. Both the extensive and intensive livestock industries are areas where attitudes and management practices can impact significantly on the welfare of animals. Domestic companion animals also need to be cared for properly to prevent adverse outcomes for their welfare. The human-animal bond is well recognised as providing considerable benefits for human health and wellbeing. The public health benefits of animal ownership cannot be separated from other aspects of animal ownership – for example food supply, food safety, and companionship.

Australia currently enjoys a favourable animal health status, and this places a high priority on controls to protect animal welfare, animal health and public health. The Australian Animal Welfare Strategy is a vital
Commonwealth initiative to ensure the best possible outcomes for all Australian animal populations.

The Strategy sets the future directions for improvements to animal welfare in Australia, and provides the international community with an understanding of our animal welfare arrangements. Funding for this important program must be guaranteed into the future.

Rural communities

Crucial aspects of rural communities hinge on the work of local veterinarians. They help ensure food produced in agricultural regions is safe to eat, help farmers increase production, promote the welfare of farm animals, and detect and respond to outbreaks of emergency animal diseases. Veterinarians also perform an important function in caring for the health and wellbeing of food, working and companion animals. Veterinarians participate in local community organisations and councils, and thereby also contribute their expertise and knowledge for the benefit of the nation.

Many rural communities are affected by the shortage of qualified veterinarians, as is the case with doctors, dentists and other health professionals. Research has indicated that this is a problem of retention rather than recruitment – many young veterinarians begin work in rural areas but move quickly back to larger centres where remuneration and support are higher and out-of-hours work is less demanding. Repayment of HECS and student loans is a factor in this decision to seek higher remuneration in metropolitan and peri-urban areas.

Other developed countries also experience difficulties in retaining veterinarians in rural and regional areas. This year the US Congress has provided scholarships for those entering rural practice or veterinary public health work. New Zealand established a scheme in 2009 to provide grants to recent graduates and their employers when young veterinarians commit to a certain number of years working in rural practice.

With veterinarians playing such a crucial role in rural communities and agricultural industries, Australia urgently needs an incentive scheme to encourage young veterinarians to stay and settle in rural areas. For such a small profession, this would not be an expensive program, but would make a significant difference to enhancing the amenity and availability of a broad skills base in rural areas.

Recommendation

Commit to the ongoing funding of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy.

Recommendation

Commit to establish a tertiary debt-based incentive program for veterinary graduates who commit to working in rural and regional Australia for extended periods.

Further information

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