



2024 ACT Election Priorities

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

ACT Division

September 2024

Veterinarians are an integral part of the fabric of our community. They manage the health and welfare of our livestock that are crucial to our international trade and to the safety and security of our food, and they work in our public health sector on managing disease risks to animals and people alike. They care for the companion animals that are increasingly part of our families.

The AVA is committed to working with the ACT Government to address critical issues outlined in this paper, to ensure the long-term sustainability of the veterinary profession and the continued health and welfare of the ACT's animals and communities.

The ACT is home to 48 veterinary premises and hundreds of veterinary professionals. The profession serves the approximately 69% of households in Australia owning pets, as well as horses, production animals, research animals and wildlife. Unfortunately, the sustainability of the veterinary profession in the ACT is at risk due to decades of underinvestment which is being felt as a critical veterinary workforce shortage.

For the security of animal industries and the wellbeing of people and animals, it is crucial that the role of veterinarians in animal health, welfare and biosecurity is maintained. To do this, two things are needed:

- Support from regulators and the community to ensure that veterinary expertise and advice is integral to every level of decision making around biosecurity and the health and welfare of animals;
- Increased investment in 'public good' services to ensure that these vital services can be sustainably provided by the veterinary profession.

Furthermore, to support the long-term sustainability of the veterinary profession and provision of veterinary services it is critical to address the mental health crisis currently impacting veterinary teams and its influencing factors (shortage of veterinary and paraprofessional staff, financial stress, working conditions, and client relations).

In recognition of the role for government in this, ahead of the ACT election, the AVA is calling on the next Government to address the following key areas:

1. Sustainability of the veterinary workforce
2. Support for veterinary care for persons experiencing vulnerabilities.
3. Increased support for ACT government veterinarians
4. Mental health support for the veterinary profession
5. Support for veterinary public good activities



Investments needed:

That the ACT government:

- Supports veterinary students' exposure to working in the ACT through funding commitments to help them participate in work integrated learning (WIL) placements in the ACT and surrounds and help to address "placement poverty".
- Support the development of a National Veterinary Workforce Strategy.
- Investigate providing subsidies for veterinary care of low-income earners.
- Provides facilities that are suitable and allow ACT residents experiencing vulnerability, such as fleeing Domestic and Family Violence situations, to take animals in their care with them.
- Conducts a comprehensive review and develop a proactive strategy to support the critical work of our ACT government veterinarians, ensure the health of all animals, and maintain our ability to respond effectively to biosecurity threats and animal welfare issues.
- Financially support the extension of a suite of AVA veterinary specific mental health support programs, including:
 - Expand the 24/7 AVA Counselling Service
 - Cultivating Safe Teams program –Psychological health and safety awareness training sessions for all individuals working in the veterinary profession in the ACT.
 - Mental health first aid for veterinary teams
- Assumes responsibility for and financially supports the costs incurred by veterinary practices when treating or caring for Crown-owned wildlife and unowned animals, such as strays.



Sustainability of the veterinary workforce and attracting vets to the ACT

The veterinary workforce in Australia has been in shortage for the past 7 years with many job vacancies for veterinarians and paraprofessionals often taking over 12 months to be filled. This has put significant pressure on the existing workforce as it tries to meet the demand for veterinary services.

The reasons behind the prolonged shortage are complex and multifaceted. It takes 5-6 years of university study to train a new veterinarian. This long training timeframe means that the labour market does not respond quickly to fluctuations in demand.

Improved workforce data is needed to better forecast future gaps in supply and demand for veterinarians. This, in turn, needs to be used to develop a National Veterinary Workforce Strategy to help minimise the likelihood and severity of shortages in the future.

Local implications

The shortage leads to greater competition for veterinarians and increases recruitment and retention challenges for veterinary businesses. This has further exposed the increasing strain that the veterinary business model is under.

In this environment, it becomes even more challenging to attract veterinarians to certain areas, like the ACT. However, there are opportunities if the ACT Government is willing to invest in attracting veterinarians.

Veterinary students generally undertake 52 weeks of practice placement during the course of their studies. The type of veterinary practice they experience and the regions they visit contribute to their decision-making about where they will work after they graduate.

One of the key ways of helping veterinary students consider future practice in the ACT is to give them positive experiences of life here when they undertake practice placements during their studies. However, there are significant financial barriers to doing so, with the student or practice having to cover the associated costs.

Practice placement support that allows veterinary students to engage in regional practice in a meaningful way is important.

Investments

That the ACT government:

- Supports veterinary students' exposure to working in the ACT through funding commitments to help them participate in work integrated learning (WIL) placements in the ACT and surrounds and help to address "placement poverty".
- Support the development of a National Veterinary Workforce Strategy



Support for veterinary care for persons experiencing vulnerabilities.

The Human-Animal bond has been shown to provide significant health benefits to humans, including improvements in mental and physical well-being. Over 69% of Australian households own a pet, with the majority of these owners reporting positive impacts on their quality of life. This bond contributes to stress reduction, enhanced cardiovascular health, and improved social interaction. These benefits, by extension, help reduce the demand on government-funded health services, such as mental health support and chronic disease management. Consequently, promoting pet ownership and animal care aligns with broader public health goals, benefiting both individuals and the public health system.

Any animal that is under human care in Australia should be able to access veterinary care, and strategies must address the barriers to accessing that veterinary care. Strategies to improve the sustainability of the profession through supporting the workforce will improve access to veterinary care.

Given that the structure of the profession has evolved as a predominantly privately funded system, the key to improving access to veterinary care to the whole community is to support the existing structure that is in place and ensure there is synergy and symbiosis with government veterinary services and charities.

The recent [NSW Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in NSW](#) considered these issues and recommended that the Government investigate providing subsidised veterinary care to low-income earners. The issues discussed in NSW are equally applicable to other jurisdictions, including the ACT.

Currently, financial support of veterinary services for clients facing hardship is only available through charities such as [ACT Pet Crisis Support](#) or [Pets In The Park](#), or through the provision of discounted or pro-bono services by the veterinary practices themselves. While veterinarians are best placed to deliver these veterinary services, it is not appropriate that they are expected to also fund it. Most veterinary practices are small businesses, and this places significant strain on their financial viability.

The community increasingly has stronger expectations on the need to care for the welfare of animals (whether they be pets or livestock). Part of this welfare is access to appropriate veterinary care. As such, the community itself (through government) needs to make provision for the costs of this care where individual owners cannot.

Animal-friendly facilities

A further area of concern is animals in domestic and family violence situations. An inability to have safe accommodation for pets can be a barrier to victims in leaving dangerous situations. There is a need for government support to ensure that there are animal-friendly facilities and emergency accommodation available.

Investments

The ACT Government:

- Investigate providing subsidies for veterinary care of low-income earners.
- Provides facilities that are suitable and allow ACT residents experiencing vulnerability, such as fleeing Domestic and Family Violence situations, to take animals in their care with them.



Increased support for ACT government veterinarians

ACT veterinary practitioners play an important role in monitoring livestock properties for outbreaks of exotic, zoonotic and emergency animal diseases.

With Lumpy Skin Disease (LSD), African Swine Fever (ASF) and Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) on our doorstep, there is an ever-present threat to our agricultural sector and economy. Our freedom from these diseases is critical for the welfare of Australian livestock and underpins current trade agreements. An incursion of either disease will have disastrous implications for our international and domestic markets, and the welfare of animals within Australia. Veterinarians are a key part of surveillance and, where required, response.

The involvement of veterinarians has been central in the eradication of Equine Influenza in Australia, and more recently the response to outbreaks of Avian Influenza, which has required the essential services provided by veterinarians working in both the government and private sectors.

In 2015 the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) reviewed Australia's veterinary services and recognised Australia as a world leader in animal health and biosecurity. It did, however, raise concerns about the nation's ability to manage a disease emergency with the current government veterinary staffing levels.

The ACT Government must consider the pressing concerns experienced by government veterinarians across a spectrum of vital services that they provide.

The AVA recommends that the government proactively employs and trains veterinary graduates to fill gaps left by retiring government veterinarians, fund appropriate biosecurity training for private veterinarians who continue to monitor private properties as part of their core activities, and fund training for companion animal veterinarians to familiarise them with EAD responses. The latter is particularly important as in a significant EAD incursion, veterinarians will need to assist, regardless of their current fields of practice.

Investment

The ACT Government:

- Conducts a comprehensive review and develop a proactive strategy to support the critical work of our ACT government veterinarians, ensure the health of all animals, and maintain our ability to respond effectively to biosecurity threats and animal welfare issues.



Mental health support for the veterinary profession

In 2019 the AVA undertook research ([AVA Veterinary Wellness Strategy 2021](#)) to better understand the size of the mental health issue impacting the veterinary profession and to inform the development of a wellness strategy. It found 66.7% of veterinarians said they had experienced a mental health condition at some stage, compared to 61.8% in the general population.

Burn out has been well recognised in the profession for some time¹²³ and the cost to the profession is estimated to be 2.01% of its value due to poor retention and reduced working hours.⁴

Many of the issues that the veterinary profession face are common to a large number of the essential service professions, however, as there is minimal public funding, these issues are accentuated within the veterinary profession.

Veterinary students and early-career graduates, especially women aged 18-35, are more likely to report poor mental health. This is due to a number of factors including specific challenges the profession experiences and a generational shift towards greater openness about mental health.

What was found from this research is that the issue needs to be addressed on multiple fronts, including these key factors influencing the mental health of those working in the veterinary sector.

AVA support

The AVA has been working to address these issues through its [Thrive](#) initiative and seek government support to expand a number of these programs to better meet the needs of the veterinary profession. Specifically, support is sought for:

- Cultivating Safe Teams program - This initiative is currently completing its pilot program and the AVA is now seeking to expand the training to all veterinary practices in the ACT. The aim is to deliver psychological health and safety awareness training sessions for all individuals working in the veterinary profession. This is a tailored, one-hour in-workplace training that is fit for purpose for the veterinary profession.
- Mental Health First Aid Training - Mental health first aid is the help provided to a person who is developing a mental health problem or who is experiencing a mental health crisis. Like physical first aid, mental health first aid is given until the person receives professional help or until the crisis resolves.
- 24/7 Counselling support – Funding would allow the AVA to double the capacity of the existing phone counselling service and to add facility for face-to-face debriefing sessions in workplaces for critical incidents.

¹ BS Kipperman, PH Kass, M Rishniw. Factors that influence small animal veterinarians' opinions and actions regarding cost of care and effects of economic limitations on patient care and outcome and professional career satisfaction and burnout. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. 2017;250:785-794

² PH Hatch, HR Winefield, BA Christie et al. Workplace stress, mental health, and burnout of veterinarians in Australia. *Australian Veterinary Journal*. 2011;89:460-468.

³ IC Moore, JB Coe, CL Adams et al. The role of veterinary team effectiveness in job satisfaction and burnout in companion animal veterinary clinics. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. 2014;245:513-524.

⁴ CL Neill, CR Hansen, M Salois. The Economic Cost of Burnout in Veterinary Medicine. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. 2022;9



Investment

That the ACT Government:

- Financially support the extension of a suite of AVA veterinary specific mental health support programs, including:
 - Expand the 24/7 AVA Counselling Service
 - Cultivating Safe Teams program – Psychological health and safety awareness training sessions for all individuals working in the veterinary profession in the ACT.
 - Mental health first aid for veterinary teams



Support for veterinary public good activities

In 2022, the AVA engaged Marsden Jacob Associates to assess the value of the veterinary profession in Australia, exploring both private benefits to animal owners and public benefits to the broader community. The [report](#) examined the roles veterinarians play, from treating individual animals to protecting public health, highlighting the tension between private, fee-based services and [public goods](#) where costs are often borne by the profession.

The study identified market failures within the sector, notably high workforce attrition and mental health challenges, which are not adequately captured by economic data. While veterinary services are primarily privately funded, the profession also provides numerous public benefits, such as emergency care, biosecurity, population control, and wildlife treatment, many of which are government-mandated or expected by the community. The inability of private practices to recoup the costs of delivering these public goods has eroded the sustainability of the profession, contributing to workforce shortages and underinvestment in labour.

To address these challenges, the report recommended mechanisms for the private veterinary sector to recoup public good costs, improved funding for government veterinary services and charities, and collaboration across sectors. It also noted the significant burden placed on private practices to treat unowned animals and wildlife, often without compensation. Legal and ethical obligations further complicate the issue, as veterinarians are expected to care for animals in distress, even outside business hours.

While the ACT Domestic Animal Services and the RSPCA do significant work in urban animal management, convenience of location and professional reputation means that veterinary practices also receive a significant number of stray animals. The costs incurred by veterinary practices when treating or caring for Crown-owned wildlife and unowned animals (such as strays) are almost entirely borne by private veterinary businesses, which significantly impacts the health, welfare, and sustainability of veterinary teams and the profession.

When an injured or sick animal is brought to a veterinary clinic, regardless of time, day, or ownership, it invokes both legal and ethical obligations. While veterinary laws may not explicitly require veterinarians to provide treatment, animal welfare laws impose a duty of care, making it an offence to neglect an animal in distress. Veterinary boards often interpret this as a legal obligation for veterinarians to offer immediate aid.

Investment

The ACT Government:

- Assumes responsibility for and financially supports the costs incurred by veterinary practices when treating or caring for Crown-owned wildlife and unowned animals, such as strays.



Contact:

The Australian Veterinary Association would welcome further discussion on the initiatives outlined in this 2024 ACT Election Priorities.

For further information please contact the AVA Public Affairs and Advocacy Team at publicvetaffairs@ava.com.au