



The veterinary sector –
An essential part of a healthy Australia
2024-2025 Pre-Budget submission
to the
Federal Government

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
January 2024

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the peak professional association representing veterinarians in Australia.

Our members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, livestock, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health, and quarantine systems while other members work in industry, research, and teaching. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

We empower the veterinary profession to thrive by providing a voice, education, community, and support.

Special Interest Groups



State and Territory Divisions





Acknowledgment of Country

The Australian Veterinary Association acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We pay our respect to them, their culture and their leaders, past, present and emerging

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State of the veterinary sector

“Every Australian’s life is impacted by animals, whether it’s owning one, wearing fibre or relying on them for food security...

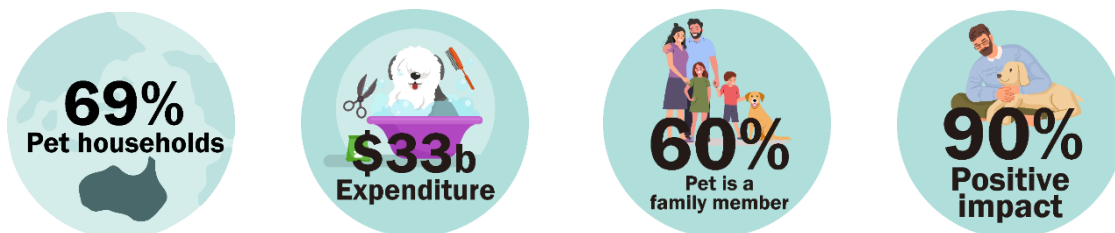
...and every animal industry relies on Veterinarians.”

- AVA President, Dr Diana Barker

Whether you own an animal or not, animals are deeply embedded into the Australian way of life. Our pets are part of the family. They offer companionship and support the physical and mental health of our community. The livestock industries deliver food security and underpin our economic prosperity. Working and sporting animals enhance our productivity and entertainment. Together they contribute significantly to the social, cultural, environmental and economic fabric of society.

These animals are sentient beings, and the community rightly expects a certain level of care for their health and welfare. They see veterinary services as essential in this – as essential as human health care. Availability of veterinary services underpin the social licence by which animal industries operate. Similar to human health, the community expects the veterinary profession to not only provide services for private (individual) benefit, but to also deliver services that provide public benefit (public good), for example disease surveillance to maintain biosecurity, and safe food production, as well as treatment of wildlife and stray animals.

Pets are important to Australians as evidenced by one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world.



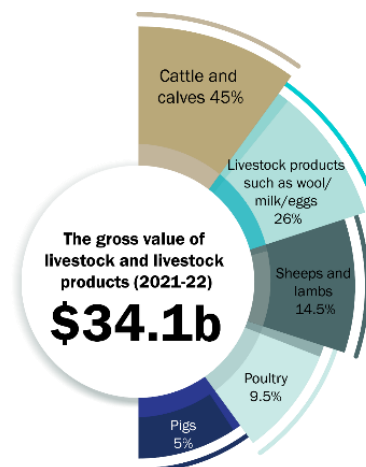
Around 90% of pet owners report that pets have a positive impact on their lives, and over 60% of pet owners refer to their pet as a member of the family, and the human-animal bond provides a myriad of benefits that directly and indirectly improve the health and wellbeing of the community.¹ The expenditure in pet care for 2022 was \$33 billion.²

¹ Animal Medicines Australia. Pets and the Pandemic: A social research snapshot of pets and people in the COVID-19 era. 2019. Available from: https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/AMAU005-PATP-Report21_v1.41_WEB.pdf

²Animal Medicines Australia. Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people. 2022. Available from: https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/AMAU008-Pet-Ownership22-Report_v1.6_WEB.pdf



The livestock industry in Australia is worth over \$30 billion annually. Veterinarians are essential to all aspects of livestock health, welfare, and production. Veterinarians are also essential to the performance animal sector including everything from Melbourne Cup winners to Guide Dogs. This industry includes animals involved in racing, pleasure, competition, and general assistance work. The value of the Thoroughbred racing industry alone is over \$4 billion annually. The value of service dogs, stock horses, guard and detector dogs (amongst others) are immeasurable.



Summary of recommendations

1. Build and retain regional veterinary workforce

1.1. Rural Bonding Scheme (HECS-HELP Forgiveness Scheme) – Commonwealth Government introduce a Rural Bonding Scheme (HECS-HELP Forgiveness Scheme) - This is suggested to cost \$19.23 million over four years (\$4.80 million per annum) and would forgive the HECS-HELP debt of 80 new graduates per year, boosting the veterinary workforce in these critically important regions.

1.2. Inclusion of veterinary professionals into rural subsidy schemes – The Commonwealth Government extends existing rural and regional support for business infrastructure development, essential service business tax concessions, accommodation stimulus packages and preferential access to community services to include the veterinary sector.

2. Veterinary professionals – at greater risk of poor mental health

2.1. Funding for the AVA wellness initiative (THRIVE) – The Commonwealth government commit to funding (\$7 million over 4 years) to the AVA's wellness initiative, THRIVE to support veterinarians and veterinary staff to lead satisfying, prosperous and healthy careers. This includes the expansion of a range of existing programs being undertaken by the AVA for the veterinary profession and implementing new programs under the areas of prevent, promote and protect. These bespoke programs provide for psychological health and safety awareness training, mental health first aid, suicide prevention and counselling.

3. Sustainability of vet services – recouping the costs of delivery of public good delivered by the private veterinary sector

3.1. Biosecurity funding – In funding the biosecurity system the Commonwealth Government commit to including increased specific investment in veterinary services (particularly rural and regional) and supporting delivery of those veterinary services that deliver public good (e.g.



getting veterinarians onto farms regularly to enhance biosecurity and animal welfare, similar to the [Animal Welfare Pathway in the UK](#)).

- 3.2. **Animal care during emergency disaster situations** – The Commonwealth Government establish a national fund to support the provision of veterinary care to animals in natural disasters.
- 3.3. **Veterinary services for wildlife** – The Commonwealth Government commit \$25 million dollars over 4 years for a pilot program to private veterinary businesses to assist with the variable cost of delivery of veterinary services to Australia’s wildlife.

4. Animal Welfare

- 4.1. **Animal welfare standards** – That the Commonwealth Government increase the budget allocation for the development of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy and increase the scope of the Inspector-General of Animal Welfare and Live Animal Exports to include all federal regulatory matters that relate to animals.
- 4.2. **Petfood regulation** – That the Commonwealth Government fund the mandatory adoption of the Australian Standard for the Manufacture and Marketing of Pet Food (AS5812) and the costs of establishing the associated framework for enforcement, including mechanisms for recall and investigation of suspected adverse events (expansion of the PetFAST system). The [PetFAST](#) system requires development and ongoing funding to remain viable – the AVA proposes that the Government provide \$600,000 for the development phase (first 3 years) then an ongoing commitment of \$180,000 annually (as set out in our submission dated 9 April 2020 accounting for inflation).

5. Setting the health of Australia up for success – data collection

- 5.1. **Workforce data (supply)** – That the Commonwealth Government invest in improved data collection, analysis and workforce planning for the veterinary sector through providing funding to the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council to implement a national data collection system to collect reliable national data on the nature of the veterinary workforce to facilitate workforce modelling and planning for future needs.
- 5.2. **Workforce data (demand)** – That the Commonwealth Government plan for, and fund, veterinary services in areas of public need, including:
 - 5.2.1. Animal welfare;
 - 5.2.2. Biosecurity
 - 5.2.3. Animal population control (e.g. desexing animals);
 - 5.2.4. Care of animals owned by the crown (e.g. wildlife);
 - 5.2.5. Care of unowned animals (strays); and
 - 5.2.6. Emergency care of owned and unowned animals in natural disasters.

6. Securing the next generation of veterinarians

- 6.1. **University funding** – That the Commonwealth Government increase funding rate per veterinary EFTSL by at least 30 per cent.



Contact details

Graham Pratt

National Manager, Advocacy & Campaigns, Australian Veterinary Association

E: graham.pratt@ava.com.au

P: 0408 083 530



1 - Build and retain regional veterinary workforce.

Workforce shortages are currently affecting the veterinary industry. This is particularly so in rural and regional areas where shortages have been persistent in the long-term. The local veterinarian is considered an essential service along with health, childcare and education. Given Australian's attitude to animals if towns and regional areas don't have access to adequate veterinary services, it makes it harder for all employers to attract and maintain a workforce.

We propose that the Commonwealth Government extends veterinarians the same incentives provided to human health professions, to encourage them to move to regional, rural and remote areas.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Rural and regional Australia is particularly affected by a lack of skilled workers across a number of sectors, including the veterinary sector. This, combined with changes in demand for differing types of veterinary services, has led to the profession having inadequate capacity to deliver veterinary knowledge and services to meet community demand. As a consequence:

- Animal health is being compromised;
- There are poorer animal welfare outcomes;
- There is increased risk around biosecurity; and
- Increased risk to human health and well-being

The substantial value of livestock farming to the Australian economy is well recognised, and the protection of this economic value is interlaced with the social licence for farming to operate. Unfortunately, the current agricultural business model, limited government support for producers, and veterinary services being a user pays system are factors that have led a significant proportion of producers being reluctant to engage with veterinary services.

As veterinary services are almost entirely privately funded, with services delivered by small to medium private businesses, the consequence to rural and regional Australia has been a decline in demand for production animal veterinary services. Concurrently across all localities (urban and rural) there has been a rapid increase in demand in the companion animal sector (where there is a strong emotional or significant financial connection with an individual animal e.g., small animals, horses, peri-urban very small holdings). These factors have resulted in a change in the rural veterinary business model to incorporate a greater emphasis on companion animals. This change in emphasis has reached the point where there is not sufficient capacity within the profession to meet the current service provision requested by livestock producers. This is an unintended consequence of requiring the animal agricultural industry to engage the veterinary profession as an optional user pays service after a history of it being delivered as a funded public good.

The rural companion animal veterinary service provision model is not as attractive to veterinarians, as similar work can be found in urban centres, where there is better provision of vital community services such as healthcare, housing, childcare, as well as improved employment opportunities for partners or other family members.



Veterinarians are more likely to be attracted to rural and regional Australia if there are flexible working conditions, minimal afterhours requirements, higher remuneration than urban centres, improved lifestyle and access to services, or a government financial subsidy (such as educational fee relief).³

To support the long-term viability of rural and regional veterinary practices, the Commonwealth Government needs to extend to veterinarians the same opportunities provided to human health professions that are being encouraged to move to regional, rural and remote areas, as veterinarians are providing an essential service.

HECS forgiveness

In particular, the AVA proposes the Commonwealth Government introduce a Rural Bonding Scheme (HECS-HELP Forgiveness Scheme) for graduate veterinarians to assist in the shortage of rural veterinarians, particularly in the area of production animal services.

This is a relatively modest investment that will assist in relieving the current workforce shortages facing the profession. Educational fee forgiveness schemes or bonding programs are in place for a number of professions and inclusion of the veterinary profession using existing policy structure is feasible. Details of the proposed scheme are outlined in Appendix 1.

Rural practice incentives

Veterinarians are important members of a rural community's ecosystem and have an important role to play in the agricultural sector. Inclusion of the veterinary profession in schemes to attract and retain skilled workers to rural and regional settings would benefit communities. **As veterinary services are essential services, the government should include the veterinary profession into any schemes that support essential service business infrastructure development, essential service business tax concessions, accommodation stimulus packages and preferential access to community services, as a measure to improve recruitment and retention of veterinarians to rural communities.**

Schemes like the ones listed below should be expanded to incorporate support for veterinary service providers in regional areas or similar veterinary specific programs established:

- A similar fund to the Regional Pharmacy Maintenance Allowance should be extended to veterinary practices.
- Regional Investment Corporation's concessional loans for farms should be extended to support development of veterinary infrastructure.
- Early Childhood Education and Care workers are given a living allowance for students undertaking practicum in rural or remote locations. A similar program is needed in veterinary education.

The veterinary profession faces similar issues to the farming community in regard to attraction and retention of workers due to issues with accommodation. The AVA is supportive of the National Farmers Federation (NFF) proposal of \$175 million over four years for a 'farmworker accommodation stimulus package' of taxation concessions and incentives to accelerate the construction and upkeep of farmworker accommodation, however the AVA is of the opinion it should be extended to the

³ Australian Veterinary Association. Veterinary Workforce Survey. 2021. Available from: <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>



veterinary profession, as issues with accommodation are factors in attraction and retention of veterinary workers.

Recommendation 1.1 Rural Bonding Scheme (HECS-HELP Forgiveness Scheme)

Commonwealth Government introduce a Rural Bonding Scheme (HECS-HELP Forgiveness Scheme) - This is suggested to cost \$19.23 million over four years (\$4.80 million per annum) and would forgive the HECS-HELP debt of 80 new graduates per year, boosting the veterinary workforce in these critically important regions.

Recommendation 1.2 Inclusion of veterinary professionals into rural subsidy schemes

The Commonwealth Government extends existing rural and regional support for business infrastructure development, essential service business tax concessions, accommodation stimulus packages and preferential access to community services to include the veterinary sector.



2 - Veterinary professionals – at greater risk of poor mental health

Veterinarians have a high risk of mental ill health and little to no access to industry specific programs and assistance.

We propose that the Commonwealth Government support the extension of a suite of AVA veterinary specific mental health support programs.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

The burn out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession are the result of a profession where the labour component has been chronically underfunded at a time of immense generational and societal change. 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.

Burn out has been well recognised in the profession for some time^{4 5 6} and the cost to the profession is estimated to be 2.01% of its value due to poor retention and reduced working hours.⁷ In 2019 the AVA undertook research in this area to better understand the size of the issue and to inform the development of a wellness strategy.⁸ This research found:

- Over half (66.7%) of people said they had experienced a mental health condition at some stage, compared to 61.8% in the general population. Of those, 60% said their condition had been diagnosed by a medical professional.
- Over 25% of people took time off work due to stress or a mental health condition and 33% did not disclose the reason to their employer.
- 54% of factors contributing to mental health issues were work related (include work related trauma, client interactions, workload, afterhours).
- Work related factors that contributed included; challenging client interactions, working long hours, managing a high workload, dealing with staff shortages, poor remuneration, after hours and on-call work and poor workplace culture.

Almost half of people felt their work has a negative or very negative impact on their overall mental health. The common psychosocial risks identified consistently were:

- challenging client interactions & expectations. - Clients' high emotional state and financial investment, along with their perceived self-efficacy and sometimes unrealistic expectations,

⁴ 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

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ CL Neill, CR Hansen, M Salois. The Economic Cost of Burnout in Veterinary Medicine. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. 2022;9

⁸ Australian Veterinary Association. *Veterinary Wellness Strategy: Summary of research findings*. 2021. Available from: <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/resources/thrive/documents/ava-short-report-research-findings.pdf>



are challenging and exhausting. Additionally, the required financial conversation adds to the complexity, and this has only worsened as the cost of veterinary care has increased. This situation is further compounded by the fear of public shaming through social or sensationalist media, causing significant mental anguish for veterinarians of all ages. Moreover, the increased threats of vexatious complaints to regulatory bodies add to their stress.

- working long hours (including afterhours) and inability to take sick or annual leave due to inability to find someone else to cover.
- high workload and pressure - 53.2% of people feel as though they do not have an appropriate workload.
- neglecting physical health due to the job.
- emotionally draining work - 72.5% of people feel they regularly leave work feeling emotionally drained.
- financial strain.

An integrated wellness approach is recommended when assessing and addressing workplace or workforce mental health. This is outlined in the THRIVE [mental health and suicide prevention framework](#), part of the [THRIVE](#) initiative, a profession led initiative that the AVA is championing. This framework encompasses the philosophies of prevent, promote and protect:

- (i) Preventing harm and mental ill-health from psychosocial hazards in the industry;
- (ii) Promoting mental health by leveraging protective factors such as strengths, capabilities, and the rewards of work; and
- (iii) Protecting individuals who experience stress and mental ill-health.

We are all responsible and accountable to prevent, promote and protect ourselves and each other. By collaborating, workplaces can manage the risks and cultivate ways of working that move towards eliminating, minimising, and preventing psychological harm. This framework is applicable to everyone in the veterinary community from students to people working in clinical practice, those in academia, industry, government and any other related veterinary field.

For a number of years the AVA has been running several of these programs (counselling, mentoring,) and instigated pilot programs (cultivating safe teams) for members. The AVA has relationships with the external providers who are the subject matter experts in the delivery of these programs. Our internal organisational structure and experience in executing these offerings would allow us to upscale the programs and institute the new programs in an effective and efficient way.

To assist in addressing this, we propose that the Commonwealth Government support the extension of a suite of AVA veterinary specific mental health support programs, including (additional details in Appendix 2):

- Expand the 24/7 Counselling Service (\$540k over 4 years)
- Improved Research and data (\$422k over 4 years)
- Expansion of the AVA mentoring program to include non-members and encompass whole of career pathways (\$2.43m over 4 years)
- Cultivating Safe Teams – Psychological health and safety awareness training sessions for all individuals working in the veterinary profession. (\$2.57m over 4 years)



- Training and toolkit for veterinary businesses to manage business-specific psychosocial risks (\$393k over 4 years)
- Mental health first aid for veterinary teams (\$594k over 4 years)

Recommendation 2.1 Funding for the AVA wellness initiative (THRIVE)

The Commonwealth Government commit to funding (\$7 million over 4 years) to the AVA's wellness initiative, [THRIVE](#) to support veterinarians and veterinary staff to lead satisfying, prosperous and healthy careers. This includes the expansion of a range of existing programs being undertaken by the AVA for the veterinary profession and implementing new programs under the areas of prevent, promote and protect. These bespoke programs provide for psychological health and safety awareness training, mental health first aid, suicide prevention and counselling for veterinarians.



3 - Sustainability of vet services – recouping the costs of delivery of public good delivered by the private veterinary sector

Veterinarians and veterinary businesses provide significant public benefits beyond the private veterinary services they offer. However, there is little government funding to support this work undertaken by the private veterinary sector. This places the veterinary business model under considerable strain and risks the loss of these public benefits as veterinary capacity declines.

We propose that the Commonwealth Government commit to funding delivery of private veterinary services that are for the public good, particularly in the areas of biosecurity, animal care during emergency disaster situations and veterinary services for wildlife.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Delivery of veterinary services is almost entirely privately funded and there is minimal public funding through government veterinary services or support of charities. The private veterinary profession provides veterinary services for individuals on a fee for service basis; however, the community and government also expect a large range of services that provide public benefit (or public good). Some of these are mandated by the government through veterinary registration while others are a community expectation. There is a long list that includes:

- Treatment obligations for pain and suffering;
- Accessibility of veterinary services for emergencies 24/7;
- Biosecurity obligations such as passive surveillance, diagnostic and reporting obligations;
- Discounted desexing to assist with animal population control;
- Treatment of unowned wildlife; and
- Treatment of animals in disaster response.

Unfortunately, decades of public benefits provided by the private sector without adequate ability to recoup the costs has eroded the sustainability of the veterinary profession and, by extension, the public benefit that it provides for the community. Inability to recoup the costs associated with delivering public good is a significant factor in increasing vulnerability of the private veterinary business model, which has led to an under investment in the labour component of the profession, a key contributor to the work force shortage.

Providing mechanisms for the private veterinary sector to recoup the cost of delivery of veterinary services for public good will improve the sustainability of the veterinary profession. Through this, an increased investment in the labour component of the profession which will lead to improved recruitment and retention.

Given that the structure of the profession has evolved to 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 collaboration with government veterinary services and registered charities, especially in the area of delivery of veterinary services that provide public good. Veterinary departments within government must be adequately funded, animal welfare and human welfare charities that provide veterinary services must be adequately funded and the private veterinary sector who provides the majority of the public good must be able to recoup the costs associated with public good delivery.



Biosecurity

The Australian *Red Meat Advisory Council (RMAC)*⁹ in a recent strategic report noted reducing the risk of Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) is an important factor expected to have significant benefit. The optional model of veterinary engagement in animal industries, particularly extensive farming systems, means that risk mitigation techniques around EAD, such as surveillance are no longer occurring effectively. In Australia 10 years ago, areas with the highest surveillance activity intensity aligned well with the distribution of the likelihood of disease introduction, establishment, and spread, with the exception of the northern Australian coastline, and these aligned with the locations of private and government veterinarians.¹⁰ It is unclear if this remains the case, given the continued erosion of supply of veterinary services in rural and regional areas. The widespread distribution of the recent EAD Japanese Encephalitis Virus before detection provides cause for concern.

The recent federal senate inquiry report looking at the adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to Foot and Mouth Disease and Varroa mite,¹¹ acknowledged these risks and recommended that the Australian government work with relevant industry bodies to increase utilisation of rural and remote veterinarians in disease surveillance and monitoring activities. Increased national investment and streamlining of funding mechanisms for onshore disease surveillance and associated diagnostic capabilities for private veterinarians and increased capacity within government veterinary services is requested.

Animal health, welfare and biosecurity are significant public goods that are valued by our community. Government support is needed to ensure that these public goods continue to be delivered. The key is getting veterinary expertise onto farms to undertake passive biosecurity surveillance and work with primary producers to improve farm planning and practices. Incentive schemes are needed like Animal Welfare Pathway in the UK, which funds annual veterinary health and welfare reviews and then supports improved on farm infrastructure and programs to improve health and welfare. Similar programs in Australia could leverage existing schemes like BIOCHECK(TM) and WELFARECHECK(TM).

Disaster response

The current Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), a cost-sharing initiative between the Australian Government and State/Territory Governments, commendably aids individuals, businesses, and communities following disasters. However, a critical gap exists in its provisions, as it fails to include emergency veterinary care for disaster-affected animals as an eligible relief and recovery measure. The consequences of this omission in DRFA have led to government support arrangements for disaster impacted animal welfare varying greatly across the jurisdictions, and often being inadequate or non-existent. Despite the essential nature of these veterinary care services to disaster impacted animals, often the financial burden is relegated onto veterinary private practice.

To ensure animal welfare is sufficiently supported, the AVA strongly believes that arrangements for veterinary services to disaster impacted animals needs to be clearly recognised at a national level

⁹ Council RMA. Meat Industry Strategic Plan 2020: with Outlook to 2030. 2020. Available from: <https://www.mla.com.au/globalassets/mla-corporate/generic/about-mla/misp-2020.pdf>

¹⁰ IJ East, RM Wicks, PAJ Martin et al. Use of a multi-criteria analysis framework to inform the design of risk based general surveillance systems for animal disease in Australia. *Preventive Veterinary Medicine*. 2013;112:230-247.

¹¹ Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot and mouth disease and Varroa mite. 2022. [Cited 2023 October]. Available from:

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024957/toc_pdf/AdequacyofAustralia'sbiosecuritymeasuresandresponsepreparedness,inparticularwithrespecttofoot-and-mouthdiseaseandvarroamite.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf



through the DRFA to assist state and territory arrangements and establish assistance measures. This will ensure the provision of necessary veterinary services in disaster-stricken regions, safeguarding animal welfare and reducing the financial strain on private veterinary businesses. This inclusion is crucial for the overall resilience of our nation in the face of future natural disasters.

Wildlife

Australia has varied and unique wildlife of high intrinsic value and cultural importance. Their interaction with humans is high and many wildlife require veterinary services, either as a result of harmful interactions with humans, naturally occurring disease, or natural disasters.

The data available provides evidence that private veterinary practices are not able to recoup their costs, with 92% of survey veterinary respondents stating that they never or rarely received reimbursements for services provided to wildlife.¹² The same study found that the pro bono nature of wildlife care limited the timeliness and extent of the care able to be delivered.

Implementation of this proposal would be best undertaken by Wildlife Health Australia, as they already have a limited program in place that allows some private veterinarians to recoup costs associated with disease investigations for diseases of importance through the NSDIP scheme.

The rising cost of providing veterinary care to wildlife is rapidly becoming unsustainable. The public expects that Australian Native Wildlife is the responsibility of the Government and are often shocked to find that veterinarians don't receive any assistance with the provision of care.

Recommendation 3.1 - Biosecurity funding

In its funding of the biosecurity system the Commonwealth Government commit to including increased specific investment in veterinary services (particularly rural and regional) and supporting delivery of those veterinary services that deliver public good (e.g. getting veterinarians onto farms regularly to enhance biosecurity and animal welfare, similar to the [Animal Welfare Pathway in the UK](#)).

Recommendation 3.2 - Animal care during emergency disaster situations

The Commonwealth Government establish a national fund to support the provision of veterinary care to animals in natural disasters.

Recommendation 3.3 - Veterinary services for wildlife

The Commonwealth Government commit \$25 million dollars over 4 years for a pilot program to private veterinary businesses to assist with the variable cost of delivery of veterinary services to Australia's wildlife.

¹² B Orr, A Tribe. Animal welfare implications of treating wildlife in Australian veterinary practices. Australian Veterinary Journal. 2018;96:475-480.



4 - Animal welfare standards

Veterinarians underpin the social licence for the use of animals in our community – whether it be companion animals, livestock, or working animals. This needs to be supported by appropriate animal welfare standards and regulation that are effective and uniform across jurisdictions.

We propose that the Commonwealth Government commit to improved funding for the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy and Inspector-General of Animal Welfare and Live Animal Exports and fund the implementation of pet food regulation.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Animal related industries require a social licence to operate. The acceptance and approval of these industries by the community is contingent on the premise that animal health and welfare is maintained to a high standard.

Animal welfare standards

A robust, independent standards setting process with adequate scientific input is crucial to a modern, functioning animal welfare system. The current commitment by the Government to renewing the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy is welcomed, but the AVA is concerned the current budget allocation is likely to be insufficient given the significance and complexity of the task. There is a significant backlog of standards, and the current process relies too heavily on individual jurisdictions taking the lead in the development of standards. Although all Australian states and territories agreed in 2005 that voluntary Model Codes of Practice for animal welfare should be updated and transitioned to nationally consistent Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines, only six Model Codes have been updated into Standards and Guidelines, and implementation in states/territory legislation has been inconsistent. Furthermore, there needs to be a mechanism to coordinate national animal welfare policy and standards development, and to publicly assess the effectiveness of state and territory implementation and enforcement, which could be best served by expansion of the functions of the role of Inspector-General of Animal Welfare and Live Animal Exports. The failure to progress animal welfare standards to date causes significant public concern for Australians as well as international communities and trading partners.

Pet food regulations

Safety of pet food has been of concern to the public and the community for many years, and outbreaks of disease as a consequence of adverse events associated with pet food have resulted in two government inquiries. In order to track health problems in dogs and cats that are suspected of being associated with pet food, treats and pet meat and identify possible patterns that might point to a cause, [PetFAST](#) was developed. This is a voluntary joint initiative of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) and the [Pet Food Industry Association of Australia](#) (PFIAA). The support of this initiative is not sustainable into the future without funding.

The second government inquiry in 2018 made the finding that the current self-regulatory framework was no longer acceptable by community standards, that is, it does not meet the general expectations of consumers. A working group of a broad section of stakeholders put forward three options for consideration by the Government, with the AVA's preferred option being Pet Food Standard AS5812 should be mandatory (adopted into legislation) and there should be a government framework and



mechanism for recall and investigation. Until this happens the safety of pet food will always be at a higher risk than the community is comfortable with.

Recommendation 4.1 - Animal welfare standards

That the Commonwealth Government increase the budget allocation for the development of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy and increase the scope of the Inspector-General of Animal Welfare and Live Animal Exports to include all federal regulatory matters that relate to animals.

Recommendation 4.2 - Petfood regulation

That the Commonwealth Government should fund the mandatory adoption of the Australian Standard for the Manufacture and Marketing of Pet Food (AS5812) and the costs of establishing the associated framework for enforcement, including mechanisms for recall and investigation of suspected adverse events (expansion of the PetFAST system). The [PetFAST](#) system requires development and ongoing funding to remain viable– the AVA proposes that the Government provide \$600,000 for the development phase (first 3 years) then an ongoing commitment of \$180,000 annually (as set out in our submission dated 9 April 2020 accounting for inflation).



5 - Setting the health of Australia up for success –data collection

Quality data is one of the foundations of effective planning. While there is a large amount of data in the veterinary and animal health sector, it is disparate and inconsistent. If Australia is to properly plan for the future health needs of our animal population, improved data is needed on both the supply and demand for veterinary services.

We propose that the Commonwealth Government commit to funding key data collection needs in the veterinary sector.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Data and digital technologies offer unique opportunities to strengthen health systems and offer efficiencies of care, yet the animal health sector has lagged behind several other sectors in harnessing the potential of data and digital technology. There is currently a lack of a national animal health infrastructure to facilitate data collection, information sharing and effective engagement and collaboration across a diverse range of disciplines and industries. Evidence of this is:

- Limited data on the national veterinary workforce. Individual veterinary registration boards collect data to varying degrees in their jurisdiction, however this is inconsistent. The AVA undertakes a biennial survey of veterinarians which reaches across the country however response rates have fluctuated and, in some years, have been low.
- Incomplete traceability of food producing animals and inadequate traceability of companion animals, which is a risk to Australia's biosecurity. This is not only important in the management of emergency animal disease, but it could be a possibility in future diseases involving humans, as the majority of emerging human infectious diseases are zoonotic.
- Omission of comprehensive statistics on animal (including livestock, companion animals, and wildlife) injuries and fatalities in natural disasters. This oversight in disaster reporting contributes to a systemic underestimation of the impacts on animals, leading to a lack of government and public awareness, and consequently, insufficient support. Such animal welfare information would provide a more accurate reflection of the disaster's impacts, thereby prompting a more suitable response and support from government, veterinarians and the public.
- Lack of a coordinated data sharing system reporting on animal health.
- Barriers to developing and utilising digital technologies (e.g. telehealth) due to inflexible and at times dated regulatory framework.

Failure to address the need for improved data collection and digital literacy in the animal health sector will prevent progression in improving workforce capability of the veterinary profession, increase Australia's biosecurity risk around both animal and human health, and prevent recognition of the impact of failure to address animals in disaster preparedness and response on human behaviour in disasters.



Recommendation 5.1 - Workforce data - supply

That the Commonwealth Government invest in improved data collection, analysis and workforce planning for the veterinary sector through providing funding to the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council to implement a national data collection system to collect reliable national data on the nature of the veterinary workforce to facilitate workforce modelling and planning for future needs.

Recommendation 5.2 - Workforce data - demand

That the Commonwealth Government plan for, and fund, veterinary services in areas of public need, including:

- *Animal welfare;*
- *Biosecurity*
- *Animal population control (e.g. desexing animals);*
- *Care of animals owned by the crown (e.g. wildlife);*
- *Care of unowned animals (strays); and*
- *Emergency care of owned and unowned animals in natural disasters.*



6 - Securing the next generation of veterinarians

It takes at least 5-6 years to train a new veterinarian at university. This long training timeframe, along with the strain that the veterinary education sector is under, are some of the key reasons that the supply of veterinarians takes so long to adjust to changing market demand.

The AVA proposes that the Commonwealth Government act now to increase funding to veterinary education.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

The Australasian veterinary education system is approaching a crisis, with changing needs for veterinarians in many increasingly complex areas and ever more pressure on universities to trim their costs and transform their teaching and research offerings. Current approaches to veterinary science education, research and service delivery will not be sustainable nor allow delivery of Australasia's long-term needs for veterinary workforce renewal and enhanced research capability.¹³

Veterinary Science courses are generally the most expensive to deliver of all university courses. The reasons for this include the lack of publicly funded hospitals to assist with training, and the need for universities to maintain herds/flocks of livestock for both veterinary and agricultural teaching and research. Students are also required to undertake work integrated learning, at their own cost in various animal establishments and with veterinary practices during their university holidays and during term time. This is because the competency requirements for registration of new veterinary graduates exceed those of other similar disciplines, such as Medicine and Dentistry. For example, medical graduates are not expected to be competent at graduation in many skills expected of new veterinarians, such as primary clinical diagnosis and treatment of disease, anaesthesia, dentistry, and surgery. Instead, medical trainees must complete two years of postgraduate residency in a public (government-funded) hospital before being eligible to practise as junior doctors. The Commonwealth, State and Territory governments share the salary and other costs of providing medical student internships. These governments also make substantial financial and in-kind contributions to the costs of pre-registration training of dentists through public dental clinics. Most significantly, trainee doctors and dentists deal only with one animal species, whose restraint and management during diagnosis and treatment is not problematic in most cases; hence less practical training is needed.

Since 2021, Veterinary Science has been in the highest Commonwealth cluster with Agriculture, Medicine, Dentistry and Pathology within the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding for domestic students. For students commencing in 2023, this cluster receives a standard annual CGS payment of \$28,196 per EFTSL. Veterinary domestic students also contribute to the second highest level of \$11,800 p.a., with most students utilising the income-contingent HECS/HELP scheme to cover these amounts. However, the net funding amount per student place still needs to be improved, with the cost per EFTSL of the total government plus student fee (cost-to-funding ratio) being 148 per cent in 2018, an underpayment rate that had been observed in previous studies.¹³

¹³ Veterinary School of Australia and New Zealand. Rethinking Veterinary Education. 2023. Available from: https://vsanz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VSANZ_Rethinking-Vet-Ed_Low-Res-FINAL-CLEAN.pdf



The Veterinary education review¹³ has made 25 recommendations to address the changing needs of the veterinary education system. Even if all structural reform opportunities are implemented, Veterinary Science education will remain significantly more expensive than Medicine and Dentistry. It will therefore be necessary to increase the funding rate per veterinary EFTSL without disadvantaging other courses and for universities to prioritise this extra funding specifically to support Veterinary Science programs (e.g. for the operation of veterinary teaching hospitals).

The AVA supports the majority of recommendations of the [veterinary education review by the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, particularly](#) recommendation 15 and 16:

- Recommendation 15 - The Australian Government move quickly to increase the funding rate per veterinary EFTSL by at least 30 per cent – and, where relevant, lift the maximum basic grant funding of universities to accommodate this increase in revenue.
- Recommendation 16 - The Australian Government consider providing a clinical training loading for a designated number of veterinary students' clinical training in priority areas.

Recommendation 6.1 – University funding

That the Commonwealth Government increase funding rate per veterinary EFTSL by at least 30 per cent.



Appendix 1 – Rural HECs Forgiveness Scheme

This is a relatively modest investment that will assist in relieving the current workforce shortages facing the profession. Educational fee forgiveness schemes or bonding programs are in place for a number of professions and inclusion of the veterinary profession using existing policy structure is feasible.

The AVA makes the following recommendations around the criteria of the Scheme:

- Participants must be an Australian citizen or permanent resident, registered to practice in Australia;
- Employment must be with a practice that includes veterinary services to large animals;
- Employment must be in a Rural or a Remote area (using the [Australian Government's Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification](#) (RRMA));
- Available to all graduates (up to 5 years after graduation);
- Up to 80 placements per year offered: 60 rural and 20 remote;
- Remote participants eligible for a maximum of \$70,000 over a 5-year period;
- Where a HECS-HELP debt exists, payment to be paid directly to HECS-HELP debt; and
- Each year completed attracts the following payment (can be consecutive or non-consecutive):

Table 3 - Suggested payment eligibility for veterinarians in the first five years post-graduation depending on locality

Stage	Rural	Remote
Completion of first year	\$9,600	\$12,000
Completion of second year	\$10,400	\$13,000
Completion of third year	\$11,200	\$14,000
Completion of fourth year	\$12,000	\$15,000
Completion of fifth year	\$12,800	\$16,000
Total	\$56,000	\$70,000

Table 4 - Impact on budget and forward estimates

Item	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	Total
Rural placements	\$3.36m	\$3.36m	\$3.36m	\$3.36m	\$13.44m
Remote placement	\$1.40m	\$1.40m	\$1.40m	\$1.40m	\$5.60m
Administration (0.01%)	\$47.6k	\$47.6k	\$47.6k	\$47.6k	\$0.19m
Total	\$4.80m	\$4.80m	\$4.80m	\$4.80m	\$19.23m

The targeted demographic is very supportive of this initiative. One hundred percent of respondents of a survey targeting veterinary students was supportive of this proposal.



Appendix 2 – AVA Thrive Proposal

Expand the 24/7 Counselling Service	
<p>The AVA provides access to telephone counselling to AVA members, their staff and family members. Currently the service provides up to 200 hours of telephone counselling per year. There is significant demand for the expansion of this service to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doubling the capacity of the existing phone counselling service • Add facility for face-to-face debriefing sessions in workplaces for critical incidents. 	\$540 000 (\$135 000/year over 4 years)
Improved Research and data	
<p>Collect accurate data on suicide statistics in the veterinary profession; veterinarians and paraprofessionals.</p> <p>There is good evidence that the veterinary profession has a higher rate of mental ill health compared to the general population¹⁴, however, the published evidence around the rate of suicide in the Australian veterinary profession is dated.¹⁵ The aim of this project will be to collect contemporary accurate data on suicide of veterinary team members in Australia. Accurate data is required to understand the current state and provide a point in time to successfully measure new interventions against.</p>	\$50,000.00 (500 hours @ \$100/hour)
<p>Annual survey to "health check" the veterinary industry and to attempt to measure the impact of our industry-led initiatives Researching and addressing industry-specific psychosocial hazards. (Prevent Promote Protect)</p> <p>In 2019 the AVA undertook researchⁱ to understand the mental health status and wellbeing of the veterinary profession. This provided useful baseline data, however it needs ongoing monitoring as initiatives (including the AVA THRIVE initiative) are undertake improve the state of the profession.</p>	\$220,000.00 (this would be co-run by an external provider – estimated cost \$55 000/ year)
<p>Staffing Staff resourcing over 4 years</p>	\$152,356.50 (over 4 years 14 hours/ week at \$52/hour)
Expansion of the AVA mentoring program to include non-members and encompass whole of career pathways	
<p>The AVA mentoring scheme is in place for new graduates and links experienced vets are the mentors and the early career veterinarians are mentees. Expansion of this program to:</p> <p>Include veterinarians who are not members of the AVA -Several reviews/research¹⁶ have recommended this be expanded to all new graduates, irrespective of membership status (750 mentor/mentee pairs). Include a peer to peer mentoring program for veterinarians regardless of career stage - to protect the profession against the challenges associated with difficult and traumatic incidents that occur commonly in veterinary work (initial program reaching 15% of the profession).</p>	\$2,104,075.00
<p>Staffing Staff resourcing over 4 years</p>	\$324, 480 (over 4 years 30 hours/ week at \$52/hour)

¹⁴ Australian Veterinary Association. Veterinary Wellness Strategy: Summary of research findings. 2021. Available from: <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/resources/thrive/documents/ava-short-report-research-findings.pdf>

¹⁵ Jones-Fairnie, H., Ferroni, P., Silburn, S., & Lawrence, D. (2008). Suicide in Australian veterinarians. *Australian veterinary journal*, 86(4), 114-116.

¹⁶ Veterinary School of Australia and New Zealand. Rethinking Veterinary Education. 2023. Available from: https://vsanz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VSANZ_Rethinking-Vet-Ed_Low-Res-FINAL-CLEAN.pdf



Cultivating Safe Teams – Psychological health and safety awareness training sessions for all individuals working in the veterinary profession. Estimated participation of 25% of veterinary businesses Australia (~1000)	
In 2023-24 the AVA has undertaken a pilot program that included 50 veterinary practices. This initiative aims to deliver psychological health and safety awareness training sessions for all individuals working in the veterinary profession. This is a tailored, in-workplace training that is fit for purpose for the veterinary profession. The purpose of the program is to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Articulate the definitions of psychological health and safety, workplace culture and 'safe teams' for veterinary and animal health businesses 2. Provide evidence-based and strengths-based examples of a safe team 3. Inspire individuals to consider how they can help build a safe veterinary team through personal responsibility and accountability 4. Encourage practice leaders, managers, and entire teams to define and commit to cultivating a workplace that is safe, equitable and well. The next phase of the program is to expand it to engage 25% of the veterinary businesses in Australia.	\$2,160,000.00 (estimate \$2160/ business)
Staff resource to manage program (1.0 FTE) over 4 years and travel costs	\$411,088.00 (over 4 years 38 hours/ week at \$52/hour)
Training and toolkit for veterinary businesses to manage business-specific psychosocial risks	
This involves the development of a tailored toolkit including resources and templates using insights from Cultivating Safe Teams pilot program. This tool kit would be supported by a series of 90 minute webinars that would be delivered each year (4/ year) to support practices in the implementation of the program.	\$285,000.00 (delivery of program with hands on service for 25 clinics at \$3200/ each)
Staff resourcing over 4 years to manage stakeholders and LMS platform.	\$108,160 (over 4 years 10 hours/ week at \$52/hour)
Mental health first aid for veterinary teams	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The AVA mental health first aid program has made a significant impact with hundreds of veterinary professionals trained (with both online and face to face components), however funding has limited its wider uptake. Additional funding will be aimed at:1,500 additional veterinary professionals trained in mental health first aid 	\$540,000.00
Staff resource to manage stakeholders	\$54,080.00 (over 4 years 5 hours/ week at \$52/hour)
TOTAL FUNDING ESTIMATE	\$6,949,159.50