



AVA National Election Platform

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Introduction

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national professional association representing veterinarians in Australia, with 8500 members from all clinical and non-clinical fields across the veterinary profession. Veterinarians work as clinical practitioners with companion animals, horses, production animals (such as cattle and sheep), wildlife and laboratory animals. Non-clinical veterinarians work in a range of areas including government, public health, quarantine, private enterprise, and academic teaching and research. The Association also has strong membership amongst our future veterinarians who are currently training in Australia's seven veterinary schools.

It is well understood that animal and human health are interdependent. Standards of animal health and welfare affect human health and safety both positively and negatively. This is recognised through the One Health paradigm, which acknowledges the health threats shared by people, animals and the environment such as zoonotic infectious diseases (e.g. COVID 19), antimicrobial resistance, food safety and security. Further, with pets as family members in almost 70% of Australian homes, the positive impact on human health and wellbeing is a significant public health benefit for most Australians.

Similar to human health care, delivery of modern veterinary care is costly, however, is highly valued by the community, and significantly contributes to the social license of animal industries to operate. It is suffering from marked underinvestment, predominantly around labour investment. This is placing considerable pressure on the wellbeing of veterinarians and on the sustainability of veterinary service provision, which is now well evidenced . The AVA is highlighting this in its Election Platform and seeks commitments from the next Government in supporting:

1. Addressing the mental health crisis in the veterinary profession
2. Making veterinary services economically sustainable and accessible
3. Workforce sustainability of the veterinary profession
4. Regulatory reform
5. One health
6. Access to international markets
7. Climate change

The 2022 election will prove to be one like no other in recent memory. The disruption and economic cost induced by COVID 19 and climate change will weigh heavily on the election narrative. AVA are calling for all candidates, political parties and ultimately the new government to undertake a bold reform agenda to tackle long-term structural issues in the animal health sector that have been accelerated by external and internal market shocks.

Industry Insights - Key Statistics

3,744
 Veterinary
 Businesses (Practices)
 in Australia ¹

The veterinary
 industry employs
25,041 people
13,993 vets
 with total wages of \$1.4b²

Veterinary profession contribution is essential for the social license and high economic performance of animal related industries.

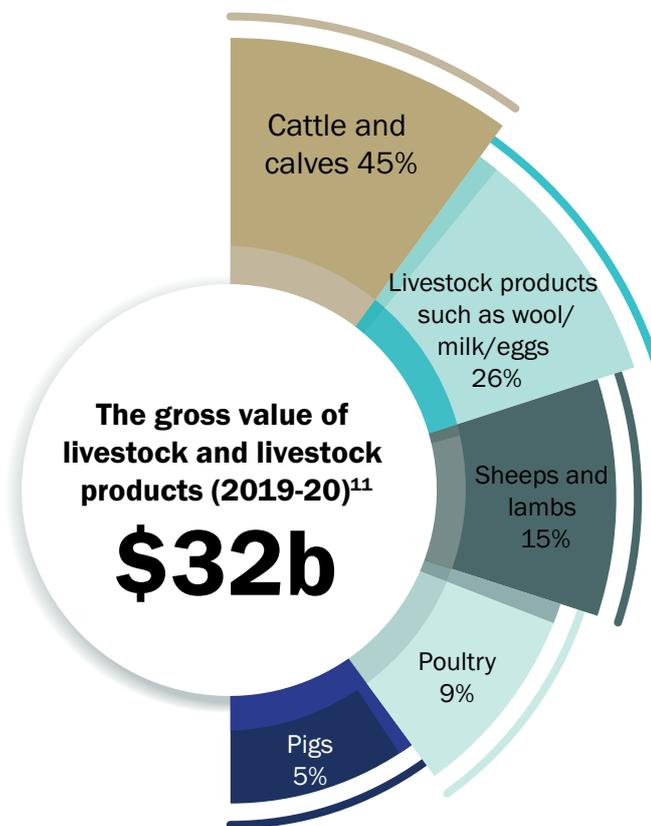
The revenue of the
 Australian Veterinary
 Industry³
\$4b

**Top export destinations
 for agriculture¹²:**
 China, Japan, European
 Union, Republic of
 Korea, United States

Pet care
 expenditure 2020⁵
Dog \$20.5b
Cat \$10.2b

The gross value of
 fisheries and aquaculture
 (2019- 2020)¹²
\$2.95b

The gross value of racing
 (horse and greyhound)¹³
\$1.4b
 plus breeding, horse sales,
 prize money and wagering



^{1,2,3} IBISWorld, June 2021

⁵ Animal Medicines Australia 2021

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics

¹² Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences

¹³ Australian Industries and Skills Committee

Industry Insights - Key Statistics

**Animals are important to the community,
and they improve their health and wellbeing.**

Almost 90% of pet owners say their pets have a very positive impact on their lives, compared to only 3% who say that impact is negative. The key benefits cited are love, affection and companionship; while the main perceived downside is organising care when away from home.⁴

More than 90% of Australian households have had a pet at some time.⁴

Currently 69% of Australian households own a pet.⁵

There are 30.4 million pets in Australia today - more than the estimated human population of 25 million.⁵

Around half of all dog and cat owners allow their pets to share their beds, and more than 25% take their pets on holidays or road trips.⁴

Over 60% of dog and cat owners refer to their pet as a member of the family and most spend an average of 3-4 hours with their pets every day.⁴

Health and Wellbeing of the Veterinary Profession. The profession is under immense stress due to underinvestment in the veterinary sector.

Remuneration of veterinarians is ~25% less compared to other professions with similar educational debt⁷, with 78% of all 0.8-1.0FTE employed veterinarians earning \$100K or less.⁸

In 2018 34% of veterinarian vacancies took over 6 months to fill⁹ whereas in 2021 31% of veterinarian vacancies took over 12 months to fill.¹⁰

Poor mental health is common in the veterinary profession with 66.6% of veterinary professionals have or are experiencing a mental health condition.⁶

^{1,2,3} IBISWorld, June 2021

⁴ Animal Medicines Australia 2019

⁵ Animal Medicines Australia 2021

⁶ AVA Veterinary Wellness strategy 2021

⁷ Graduate outcomes survey -longitudinal 2021

⁸ AVA workforce survey - salary integration 2021

⁹ Australian veterinary work force survey 2018

¹⁰ Australian veterinary work force survey 2021



Summary of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1.1:** Australian Government support of \$3m over five years to implement programs to address key findings of the Superfriend report on a Veterinary Wellness Strategy.
- **Recommendation 1.2:** The Australian Government to implement an Assistant Minister for Wellness.
- **Recommendation 2.1:** Development of a mechanism to allow consistent secure payment for veterinary services delivered in natural disasters and to unowned animals, including wildlife.
- **Recommendation 2.2:** A mechanism to provide subsidisation of pet insurance.
- **Recommendation 3.1:** Creation of a HECS bonding scheme for regional and rural vets
- **Recommendation 3.2:** Funding for further analysis of education and training needs of the profession to address labour market shortages in rural and regional areas and to increase students' exposure to rural and regional Australia.
- **Recommendation 4.1:** Harmonisation of veterinary licensing across all jurisdictions in Australia via an inter-governmental committee comprising all Australian Governments, state or territory veterinary boards and the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.
- **Recommendation 5.1:** The introduction of a national One Health framework for disease prevention and control in Australia.
- **Recommendation 6.1:** Benchmarking of Australian animal welfare practices against trading partners, protecting our competitive advantages while ensuring modern animal welfare is achieved.
- **Recommendation 7.1:** Sector-based emissions reduction transition strategies to be prepared and involvement of AVA in any working groups to progress the matter.



1. Addressing the mental health crisis in the veterinary profession¹

Even prior to the onset of COVID 19, there were considerable wellness problems across a number of sectors in the veterinary profession. Research shows that the profession experiences suicide rates of four times those of the general population. COVID 19 has exacerbated mental health issues within the profession. AVA has commissioned independent research by workplace mental health consultants, Superfriend, to investigate mental health amongst the profession. What has been found is that the issue needs to be addressed on multiple fronts, including financial stress, working conditions, and client relations. AVA has made considerable investment in research and support services for veterinarians suffering mental health issues and will be seeking \$3 million in government support over the next 5 years to implement the findings of the research.

Commitments should be made to improving workplace mental health issues that are being experienced in many sectors of the economy. The challenge for policy makers is the extent and nature of the problems are different for different sectors. The Government should adopt a sectoral approach, supported by industry specific research to fund targeted programs to address wellness.

As the challenges are multi-faceted and cut across portfolios, AVA recommends that a new Assistant Minister for Wellness be created to address the issue on a whole of government basis.

Recommendation 1.1: Australian Government support of \$3m over five years to implement programs to address key findings of the Superfriend report on a Veterinary Wellness Strategy.

Recommendation 1.2: The Australian Government to implement an Assistant Minister for Wellness.

2. Making veterinary services more economically sustainable and accessible²

The veterinary sector bears significant economic costs in maintaining animal health and welfare for the overall community, particularly through provision of “in kind” labour. This is enhanced during natural disasters or in the case of unowned animals, when veterinarians both forego their usual income and bear the cost of treating injured animals. A natural result of prolonged inadequate remuneration for highly skilled work is labour market shortages. These shortages in the veterinary sector are typically experienced across all cohorts rurally, regionally, in metropolitan areas and amongst early career vets. Low rates of pay compared to other professions such as medicine, engineering, dentistry, significant educational debt and difficult working conditions combine to make the industry an unattractive one financially to remain in long-term. There is a significant attrition rate in the profession during the first ten years of practice as veterinarians seek alternative employment in often unrelated sectors – creating sub-optimal outcomes for the economy and society.

Funding for payment to veterinarians who provide assistance in disaster situations

Veterinarians face the dual problems of being price takers in the market for veterinary services to owned animals, while also having legal responsibility to provide care for unowned animals (like wildlife and stray animals) with no prospect of compensation. The free service that veterinarians are compelled to provide becomes a net cost when labour and materials are taken into consideration. This ‘constriction of labour’ is not mirrored anywhere else in the private sector.

¹ <https://www.ava.com.au/wellness/>

² [https://www.qiit.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey--longitudinal-\(gos-l\)#anchor-2](https://www.qiit.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey--longitudinal-(gos-l)#anchor-2)

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There is an urgent need for Government to develop a system of payment to veterinarians to provide for the treatment of unowned animals which is currently being provided at the considerable personal and financial cost of veterinarians.

Recommendation 2.1: Development of a mechanism to allow consistent secure payment for veterinary services delivered in natural disasters and to unowned animals, including wildlife.

Pet Insurance

The availability of pet insurance to cover some of the costs of animal treatments is a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia. At this stage the market is still maturing with uptake being low and many of the products not yet meeting customer expectations. This results in relatively high premiums and mixed consumer confidence in the market. Despite the current state of the market, pet insurance provides a potential solution to one of the biggest problems confronting veterinary practices – the affordability of 21st century veterinary care to

animals. Concerns over cost is a major cause of dispute between veterinary practices and clients. Financial constraints around treatment options are one of the causes of wellness and ethical issues among veterinarians. Pet insurance can provide a financial safety net for owners to mitigate against unexpected veterinary expenses. However, it needs to have wider take-up to improve coverage and reduce the cost of the insurance.

Australia has addressed human health insurance by providing universal coverage under Medicare, which is supplemented by private health insurance. With almost 70% of households having pets – a similar figure to the proportion of households with families – consideration should be given to a mechanism to provide affordable and reliable coverage for all animals to share the financial burden of maintaining animal health beyond a small section of the community and the veterinary profession. A means-tested subsidy for pet insurance similar to the system for private medical insurance, would be beneficial in providing this coverage for all animals.

Recommendation 2.2: A mechanism to provide subsidisation of pet insurance.



3. Workforce sustainability

Education and training are an important medium-term strategy to help tackle labour market shortages. It was highlighted earlier that there are marked labour shortages in all sectors of the profession, particularly early career, rural and regional veterinarians. Without veterinarians in rural and regional areas risks emerge in Australia's food production and add to bio-security risks.

Veterinary education is expensive to deliver and student experiences particularly in the rural and regional sectors come at an increasing cost to both veterinary students and the veterinary profession. This results in fewer graduates in rural and regional areas. Given the importance of the veterinary profession to society and the role the profession plays in biosecurity, food

security, human health and well-being, it is critical that veterinary positions in rural and regional Australia can be filled. A rural bonding scheme, similar to that offered to medical graduates, would be a strong incentive for early career vets to fill non-metropolitan positions.

Further analysis into the education and training of veterinary professionals to address labour market shortages – specifically in regional and rural areas and amongst early career vets is required. In the interim funding to assist students to increase their exposure to areas of the profession that are suffering the greatest labour shortages, e.g farm animal veterinarians, public health, pathology is likely to result in positive outcomes.

Recommendation 3.1 Creation of a HECS bonding scheme for regional and rural vets

Recommendation 3.2 Funding for further analysis of education and training needs of the profession to address labour market shortages in rural and regional areas and to increase students' exposure to rural and regional Australia.



4. Regulatory reform

Harmonisation of veterinary legislation

Over past decades, it has been acknowledged that regulatory reform creates significant benefits for economies. There has been a push to harmonise regulations relating to various professions between the States and Territories. This was previously achieved through the Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG).

The veterinary profession continues to operate under different regulations in each State and Territory. The regulatory regime lacks consistency for animal health regulation, reporting and safety, accountability and funding across Australia

COAG has recently been replaced by the National Cabinet. While this mechanism may be appropriate for dealing with a major pandemic, it is not the correct institutional structure to achieve regulatory harmonisation.

Recommendation 4.1: Harmonisation of veterinary licensing across all jurisdictions in Australia via an inter-governmental committee comprising all Australian Governments, state or territory veterinary boards and the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.

5. One Health

National framework for disease prevention and control in Australia

Animal health, human health and environmental health are inextricably intertwined and interdependent. The health of one affects the health of all. The COVID-19 pandemic – a human health crisis of likely animal origin – has underlined the importance of the One Health concept. An Australian One Health Framework for disease surveillance, prevention and control – similar to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and other potential models – is needed for prevention and response to future pandemics, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and new and emerging infectious diseases such as Hendra virus. This will provide cost effective management of communicable and

non-communicable diseases as well as other problems with local, regional and global impact.

Recommendation 5.1: The introduction of a national One Health framework for disease prevention and control in Australia.

6. Access to international markets

There is growing evidence that animal welfare practices are increasingly impacting access to domestic and international markets. As tariff barriers are removed, there is a growing reliance on non-tariff barriers, including relating to animal welfare practices. The issue is that Australia needs to be particularly aware of ensuring that our standards meet or exceed those of our trading partners. By doing so, we minimise the potential for stakeholders in those countries to block our access to their markets.

This is a real threat as evidenced by recent activity of the British RSPCA and farming groups in the UK. They have identified several differences in the animal welfare standards of Australia and the UK that are barriers to the implementation of the recently signed Free Trade Agreement between the two countries.

There has been a trend by the industry to deal with animal welfare concerns through broader access to analgesics. However, this creates other public health issues, risks further cutting animals off from accessible veterinary care, and ultimately misses the messages being delivered by markets and animal welfare science. Increasingly informed consumers are demanding that animal health and welfare be prioritised in production processes. This, coupled with an improving understanding of the science behind animal welfare, points to the essential ongoing involvement of veterinarians (experts in the science and trusted by the community) as the key element of future-proofing our access to markets for animal products.

Recommendation 6.1: Benchmarking of Australian animal welfare practices against trading partners, protecting our competitive advantages while ensuring modern animal welfare is achieved.

7. Climate Change acknowledgement

Australia committed to achieve a net zero greenhouse gas emission target by 2050 at COP26. Veterinarians are responsible for the welfare of animal sources of carbon emissions. Sector strategies on the transition to a net zero economy are required as a matter of urgency. The veterinary profession would welcome involvement in any sector strategy to provide input into innovative practices that reduce carbon emissions along with protecting the welfare of the animals that may be affected during the transition.

Recommendation 7.1: Sector-based emissions reduction transition strategies to be prepared and involvement of AVA in any working groups to progress the matter.

The Australian Veterinary Association would welcome further discussion on the initiatives outlined in this submission. For further information please contact Dr Cristy Secombe, Head of Veterinary and Public Affairs by email on cristy.secombe@ava.com.au