Animals play a wide range of roles in the lives of people. They provide companionship, recreation, food, livelihoods, trade and biodiversity. Enhancing the health and welfare of animals is good for people, communities, society and our economy, and this is the message behind the commitments we would like to see from our political parties during the 2013 federal election campaign.

The key themes for our policy platform for 2013 are:

1. **Improving animal welfare**
2. **Disease surveillance and response**
3. **Creating a stronger veterinary workforce**
4. **Fighting antimicrobial resistance.**

Dr Ben Gardiner
President

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the only organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 7500 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession – clinical practitioners, government veterinarians, those working in industry, research and teaching, and veterinary students.

**1. Improving animal welfare**

Community expectations for higher animal welfare standards in Australia are increasing. Veterinarians work to improve animal health and welfare every day. They have substantial scientific training and a valuable perspective to bring to animal welfare debates.

Australia needs to continue its efforts to improve animal welfare standards for all animals, including those used in animal agriculture. At the same time, agricultural industries are vital to Australia’s economy and improvements need to be made in a sustainable way that understands all the implications of changes to the way we keep, manage and use animals for food.

The Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS) is an important national initiative that brings together all stakeholders to make improvements to animal welfare across all species. It is critical that funding and commitment for the AAWS continues in the long term, and that its achievements are able to be communicated broadly to the community where there is a significant need for animal welfare education and awareness.

In particular, the development of the animal welfare standards and guidelines is a positive and inclusive process and there is the potential for significant animal welfare gains. However, the process is taking far too long, and increased resources are needed to reach conclusions in a timely way.

The impetus behind the proposal for an Independent Office of Animal Welfare is an admirable concern for the wellbeing of animals, but the concept appears to be at odds with the AAWS. It is difficult to see how such an office could deliver outcomes for animals given the need for animal welfare to be part of our international trade activities, and the constitutional responsibility of the states and territories for animal welfare.

The AAWS provides a better framework to deliver sustained improvements to animal welfare across all sectors and jurisdictions. Further enhancements, commitment and funding for the AAWS would be a very worthwhile investment in the welfare of animals in Australia.
2. Disease surveillance and response

Animal diseases are a major cause of animal welfare problems across all species. They are also a significant threat to animal industries. The equine influenza outbreak in 2007-08 cost Australian governments approximately $371 million in response activities and industry assistance. It also cost another $1.5 billion in indirect costs to the horse industry and the Australian economy.\(^1\)

An outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Australia has been estimated as costing the economy at least $7 billion but as much as $16 billion depending on its duration. Regaining market access and rebuilding our animal industries afterwards may dramatically escalate these figures.\(^2\)

Around 75% of emerging infectious diseases in humans come from animals,\(^3\) so devoting veterinary expertise to monitoring disease and responding to new pathogens is critical in protecting public health.

Over past decades, animal disease surveillance and response capacities have been significantly wound back by state and territory governments. Veterinary pathology laboratories have been largely centralised and now service very large areas. Transport costs have increased significantly, sample submissions are declining, and our disease surveillance capacity has contracted as a result. Delays in samples getting to laboratories, especially after hours and on weekends, mean delays in diagnosing and addressing potentially catastrophic infections such as highly-pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) or foot and mouth disease.

States and territories have also moved away from their responsibility to monitor animal diseases that occur normally in Australia. This lack of surveillance can put at risk our ability to identify an exotic disease like rabies – if we don’t know what is happening in the natural disease cycle, we won’t know when something changes due to a new disease.

While state and territory governments have significantly reduced spending on field veterinarians, there has been no recognition of the need for private veterinarians to fill the gap.

We urgently need to develop a model of public and private veterinary partnerships to maintain our favourable disease status for our international markets, and to protect the health of the Australian public. An important starting point would be to quickly complete the implementation of national recognition of veterinary registration to allow rapid mobilisation of veterinarians from around Australia in the event of a serious disease outbreak.

3. Creating a stronger veterinary workforce

Despite the critical public good services provided by the veterinary profession, and an ongoing trend for governments to reduce spending on field veterinarians, there is no centralised workforce planning for the profession in Australia. It’s essential that the nation has the right number of vets to meet the needs of Australia’s animals and their owners, and that those vets are where they’re needed.

Three new veterinary schools have been established in the last 10 years, and the student population at the existing four schools has grown in that time. As a result, large numbers of new veterinarians have started to enter the profession.

Given the high cost of training for courses such as veterinary science to both government and students (current students graduate with a HELP debt of around $50,000), prospective students can reasonably expect that government will help ensure that future supply will meet demand for veterinary graduates.

Yet there has never been a veterinary workforce analysis that covers the full range of demand, supply and future needs. Filling this data and analysis vacuum is the necessary first step to planning an effective veterinary workforce in Australia.

ACTION

Address the logistics of timely sample delivery to central pathology laboratories for the protection of Australians and their animals, and to meet international surveillance requirements

Fast-track the Animal Health Committee project to establish standard terms and conditions for the engagement of private veterinary practitioners in emergency animal disease responses

ACTION

Provide leadership to states and territories in how they can establish private-public veterinary partnerships to maintain disease surveillance, preparedness and response capacity

Encourage states and territories to rapidly complete implementation of national recognition of veterinary registration to ensure preparedness for a cross-border disease outbreak

ACTION

Commission a research study by the Productivity Commission into the veterinary workforce to ensure sustainable supply in the long term

Abandon the proposed limit on self-education expense tax deductions
The AVA has commissioned research to analyse the available sources of data, and to recommend a way to achieve effective workforce planning for the profession. This research has emphasised that progress will not be possible without a detailed stock and flow study of the profession.

In 2006, the Productivity Commission was asked to undertake a research study on the health workforce after a 2004 decision by the Council of Australian Governments to gather reliable data on current and future needs for the health workforce. A similar research study by the Productivity Commission for the veterinary workforce is urgently needed to ensure that future animal health and welfare needs are met.

A limit on self-education expenses able to be claimed as tax deductions by individuals and sole traders was announced in the 2013 Federal Budget. Unfortunately this will severely affect the veterinary profession’s ability to meet mandatory registration requirements for continuing professional development in most states and territories. Abandoning the proposed limit will allow veterinarians to undertake the additional education and training they need to remain at the forefront of veterinary science and care for the welfare of Australian animals.

### 4. Fighting antimicrobial resistance

Antibiotic resistance is a global issue and it has been shown that antimicrobial resistance can be passed to humans from direct contact with animals and through the food chain. The veterinary profession accepts its responsibility to work alongside human health professions in Australia to fight resistance at every opportunity.

Veterinarians rely on antibiotics to prevent suffering in pets, livestock and other animals, and to maintain the safety of our food. It is critical that they are able to retain access to the essential medications they need, and that they prescribe them responsibly. The AVA already has a significant strategic project underway to improve antimicrobial stewardship by the veterinary profession, and is working alongside human health organisations to promote the fight against antimicrobial resistance.

The AVA generally supports the recommendations of the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee Inquiry on Progress in the implementation of the recommendations of the 1999 Joint Expert Technical Advisory Committee on Antibiotic Resistance. As highlighted in the inquiry report, a coordinated approach across human and animal health sectors is essential to have any effect on the inexorable increase in antimicrobial resistance.

The AVA supports the development and implementation of a national strategy by the Antimicrobial Resistance Standing Committee (AMRSC), and this should be prioritised for development and implementation as soon as possible.

A critical step is for the Australian government to set up systems to accurately monitor and report both antimicrobial use and antimicrobial resistance in high-risk species (including humans) on an ongoing basis. This is essential for early detection and effective response to the increasing threat of resistance.

It is becoming clear that inappropriate use of antimicrobial agents in countries within our region is likely to impact on the level of resistance in Australia. For example, imported fresh food can be contaminated with resistant bacteria and travellers returning from countries with high risk of antimicrobial resistance have been shown to carry antimicrobial-resistant bacteria for many months after returning to Australia. Resistant bacteria then have the potential to circulate here and Australia needs to understand and take this threat seriously.

With existing strong ties to countries in the region, and the successful precedent of helping to establish the Regional Animal Welfare Strategy, we have the opportunity to influence our neighbours by funding and establishing a regional strategy to address antimicrobial use and resistance management.

We must avoid a crisis where antibiotics become ineffective in treating common serious illnesses, and routine surgical procedures become life-threatening once again.