



Have your say

Mental health and wellbeing in NSW



Please read the [Consultation Paper available here](#) before writing your submission. It gives context for each of the questions in this template.

Tips for using the template



Writing your submission

- You can type directly into this template.
- Or if you prefer, you can copy and paste text originally written in other programs such as Microsoft Word into this template. It should keep your formatting intact.



Submission length

- Please limit your submission to around 5000 words.
- Around 600-700 words in a regular 11pt font will fit on one page in this template's layout. If you were to fill every page, that would be around 5000 words.



How to lodge your submission

- Save the completed template on your computer or network.
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About you

THESE QUESTIONS ARE OPTIONAL.

If you wish to remain completely anonymous, you can skip this page.

If you are writing this submission on behalf of an organisation, please complete the following table.

Name of the organisation	Australian Veterinary Association
Contact person's name	George Bath - Senior Advocacy Officer
Contact person's email address	george.bath@ava.com.au

OR

If you are writing this as an individual*, please answer the following questions.

Name (OPTIONAL)	
Postcode (OPTIONAL)	
Email address (OPTIONAL)	

Which of the following describes you? You can tick as many as are relevant.

- ☐ I have an interest in mental health and wellbeing
- ☐ I work in the mental health and wellbeing sector
- ☐ I work in another government or non-government organisation that intersects with this issue
- ☐ I have personal lived experience of mental health issues and/or suicidal distress
- ☐ I have lived experience as a carer of someone with mental health issues and/or suicidal distress
- ☐ I am an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
- ☐ I am lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ+)
- ☐ I was born in a country other than Australia
- ☐ I speak a language other than English at home
- ☐ I am a person with disability
- ☐ I have had contact with the justice or corrections systems
- ☐ I am currently or have been homeless
- ☐ I have or had personal issues with the use of alcohol and/or other drugs

***If you are completing this template on behalf of someone else**, please briefly explain that context. Please do not give that person's name unless they have given you permission to do so.

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About this submission

OPTIONAL

Is this submission written on behalf of a group such as a committee, expert panel or something similar?

Was it written as the result of a workshop, network process or something similar?

If so, please provide some brief details here so that we understand the context of where it is coming from. Please include the names/positions/organisations of participants if that is relevant (and if they consent for that to be provided).

If this is not relevant to your submission, simply leave this page blank.

This submission is a result of comprehensive consultation with a cross-section of Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) members. It draws upon professional and lived experiences, as well as data from internal research and the AVA's mental health and wellbeing initiative, THRIVE.

1. What is working?

Several positive developments and existing initiatives are providing a foundation for improved mental health within the veterinary profession. The availability of online and telehealth mental health services has been a positive step, particularly for veterinary professionals in rural and regional areas, who can face significant geographical barriers to accessing in-person support. These platforms offer a degree of flexibility that is crucial for those working long, unpredictable hours.

Furthermore, profession-specific, peer-led programmes are proving to be effective. The AVA's own THRIVE initiative is a key example, demonstrating a proactive approach to mental health and wellbeing. The Cultivating Safe Teams workshops have shown tangible results in increasing participants' confidence to identify psychosocial hazards and recognise protective factors. Similarly, the Graduate Mentoring Programme and the provision of Mental Health First Aid training offer essential support and skills development from within the profession itself. These initiatives are a crucial step towards developing a more resilient workforce as they are tailored to the unique stressors of the veterinary context and are delivered by peers who truly understand the challenges.

The profession also benefits from the dedication of its members and organisations that are actively working to break down the stigma associated with mental health. The willingness of individuals to share their experiences and of organisations like the AVA to champion these issues has created a growing conversation around mental wellbeing, which is a vital first step towards meaningful change.

2. What is not working?

The current system has several significant shortcomings for the veterinary profession. Anecdotal and existing evidence highlights that accessing timely, in-person mental health care is a major barrier for rural and regional veterinarians. Specific barriers to seeking care reported by veterinarians include the difficulty of taking time off work, the cost of services, stigma, fear of repercussions from veterinary boards, pride, and a lack of awareness about where to find help.

Workforce-related mental health risks are alarmingly high. Research indicates that veterinary professionals have experienced mental health conditions at a higher rate than the general population. The profession is fraught with psychosocial hazards, including:

- Public abuse, often based on the misconception that vets are "just in it for the money."
- Ethical dilemmas, such as euthanising an animal when a client cannot afford treatment or witnessing animal abuse and neglect cases.
- Financial pressures from a relatively low salary and high university debt.
- Long hours, leading to isolation from support systems like family and friends.
- After-hours duties and sleep deprivation.
- Toxic workplace cultures and emotional whiplash (e.g., transitioning from a puppy vaccination to an emergency case).
- Isolation for rural and remote vets, who may be sole charge.
- Safety concerns when visiting properties, especially after hours.
- Exposure to racism, misogyny, and bigotry.
- Compassion fatigue.

Furthermore, the lengthy and drawn-out complaints process with the Veterinary Practitioners Board (VPB) is a significant mental health hazard. A lengthy and uncertain process can become a psychosocial risk in itself, compounding the stress already present. Other health professions are moving toward timeliness standards, early triage of low-risk matters, and "just culture" approaches to reduce unnecessary harm while maintaining accountability. Regulatory improvements in this area could have a disproportionate positive impact on practitioner wellbeing and set a useful benchmark for veterinary regulation nationally. This issue, along with difficulty accessing services during typical working hours, is amplified for rural and remote vets.

A lack of specific data on mental health within the veterinary profession in NSW also makes it difficult to design and implement effective, evidence-based interventions. Wait times for community services, such as ADHD/Au assessments, are also a significant challenge.

3. What needs to change?

A fundamental shift is needed to address the unique mental health challenges faced by the veterinary profession. Tailored, profession-specific mental health programs are required, with a particular focus on the stressors and demographics of the veterinary workforce. For instance, data indicates a higher representation of suicides among mid-career women in the veterinary profession, which differs from the general population's trends.

There needs to be increased and consistent data collection by the government to better identify at-risk populations and professions due to increased exposure to psychosocial hazards such as isolation and long hours. Funding is essential to support a variety of interventions, including financial support, debt forgiveness, and subsidies to encourage veterinary graduates to work in regional and remote communities, thereby decreasing pressures on existing staff. Furthermore, industry-specific programs that educate employers on their legal obligations to mitigate psychosocial hazards are crucial.

We also need to implement solutions to help retain and entice veterinarians to rural areas. Incentives for general practitioners in these areas to employ recent or less experienced graduates are needed to stop the drain of principal veterinarians. Additionally, veterinarians in crisis need access to affordable facilities quickly. The AVA Benevolent Fund should be a priority for expansion and fundraising to provide financial support to those in need. Finally, there should be an investigation into and funding for veterinary social work, a specialised role that can provide significant support.

4. How should change happen?

Change should happen through a multi-faceted approach involving collaboration between the government, industry associations, and academic institutions. The government can lead by providing targeted funding for programs aimed at at-risk professions. This could include a rural bonding scheme to attract and retain veterinary staff in underserved areas. Specific solutions could include providing tax breaks to veterinary practices that employ recent graduates under a traineeship program and offering HECS debt reduction per year of service in a rural practice or area. A support person could also be made available to check in on these arrangements through a combination of in-person visits and regular Zoom meetings.

It is vital that the government ceases the closure of rural laboratories and reduces the capacity of government diagnostic services, as these actions place additional burdens on private practices.

Additionally, a whole-of-government approach should recognise the critical role of companion animals in human health and wellbeing. Funding and support for partnerships between aged care facilities and veterinary services, for example, could help keep vulnerable people and their pets together, enhancing community wellbeing.

5. What could improve mental health and wellbeing across our communities?

Improving the mental health of veterinary professionals will have a profound flow-on effect on the wellbeing of the wider community. A mentally healthy and well-supported veterinary workforce is better equipped to serve its clients and communities, fostering trust and providing consistent, high-quality care. This is a critical point because veterinarians are often key "connectors" in their communities, providing one of the few remaining face-to-face services that people rely on.

Beyond this direct effect, strengthening the human-animal bond is a powerful and often-overlooked tool for improving community wellbeing. The concept of "One Health" recognises that the health of animals is intrinsically linked to the health of people. Numerous studies have shown that pets have a positive impact on human mental health, reducing feelings of loneliness, stress, and anxiety. They can provide a sense of purpose and routine, and in some cases, have been shown to help reduce urges of self-harm and prevent panic attacks. By supporting the health of pets, the veterinary profession plays a vital, indirect role in safeguarding the mental wellbeing of the public.

To capitalise on this, we must invest in programmes that support this bond, especially for vulnerable community members. This includes:

- Subsidised veterinary care for people in low socioeconomic circumstances to ensure they can afford to keep their companion animals healthy.
- Partnerships between veterinary clinics and aged care facilities to help older people keep their pets as they age or become more vulnerable.
- Collaborations with community mental health services to provide veterinary support for clients who may be struggling with mental health challenges.

Furthermore, a key way communities can improve mental wellbeing is by demonstrating empathy and understanding towards their veterinary teams. This means fostering a culture of mutual respect and patience, recognising the immense pressures faced by vets. Actions such as refraining from personal attacks, understanding the financial realities of veterinary care, and acknowledging the ethical dilemmas vets face can directly reduce psychosocial hazards in the workplace.

Community-wide awareness campaigns that highlight the dedication and compassion of veterinary professionals could also have a significant impact on reducing stigma and fostering a more supportive environment.

A thriving veterinary profession is therefore a prerequisite for a thriving community.

6. What roles should NSW Government departments and agencies play in that?

Addressing the mental health crisis requires a comprehensive, system-wide approach. It is crucial to recognise that factors which may not at first seem directly related to mental health services - such as barriers to accessing diagnostic services, the challenges of rural practice, and the financial pressures of debt - can have a profound impact on the wellbeing of veterinarians. Alleviating these broader systemic burdens is a critical and effective way to improve mental health outcomes.

In this context, the NSW Government should play a proactive and supportive role, which includes:

- Recognising the vital role of pets in safeguarding public mental health and wellbeing. The concept of "One Health" highlights the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. Vets act as "connectors" in the community, providing a face-to-face service and playing a crucial role in maintaining the health of companion animals, which numerous studies have shown to have a positive impact on human mental health, reducing self-harm and preventing panic attacks.
- Providing support and compensation for the care of wildlife. The immense emotional and physical burden of attending to wildlife, often during after-hours calls with no financial reward, is a significant stressor. The government should support veterinarians in this vital community service.
- Implementing a rural bonding scheme to ensure veterinary services are available in all communities.
- Supporting out-of-hours GP telemedicine consultations to improve health access for those who cannot leave their workplaces during the day.
- Providing funding for animal owners in dire need, thereby reducing the financial and emotional burden that often falls on veterinarians.
- Ensuring councils take appropriate responsibility for stray and abandoned animals, thereby relieving a significant source of emotional and financial pressure on veterinary practices.
- Supporting the contribution of companion animals to community health and wellbeing.

7. How will we know that we are making a difference?

We will know we are making a difference through the implementation of a consistent and robust data collection framework. Good, consistent data collection will be essential, including better statistics on suicide, help-seeking behavior, absenteeism due to mental health, and other general wellness indicators. This data must be collected regularly over long periods of time and be very granular, allowing for an analysis of different demographics and professions/job types. This granularity is important for non-government programs to accurately assess their outcomes against what is happening in the greater community.

Success would be measured by:

- A decrease in the prevalence of mental health conditions, burnout, and suicide within the veterinary profession.
- An increase in help-seeking behavior, measured by greater utilisation of mental health services. Improved retention of veterinary staff in rural and regional areas.
- A reduction in the number of veterinarians reporting psychosocial hazards and stigma as significant issues in their workplace.

8. Is there anything else you would like to say?

The veterinary profession is a vital component of public health in NSW. The mental health challenges faced by veterinarians are complex and distinct from those of the general population. Addressing these issues requires a tailored, evidence-based approach that acknowledges the unique stressors of the profession.

We urge the NSW Government to consider this submission and to partner with the AVA to develop and implement targeted solutions that will not only improve the wellbeing of veterinary professionals but also enhance the health and wellbeing of communities across the state.