



The veterinary sector –
An essential part of a healthy Australia
2025-2026 Pre-Budget submission
to the
New South Wales Government

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
December 2024

Acknowledgment of Country

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

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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.

AVA Special Interest Groups





Parliamentary Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortages in NSW

Background

In early June 2023 the New South Wales (NSW) Parliament established a Committee to inquire into and report on the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW. The AVA [briefed](#) the Inquiry Committee members in late June on the current state of the profession. The establishment of the Inquiry and its subsequent deliberations were heavily influenced by the AVA's extensive advocacy on veterinary workforce issues, particularly for the 2023 NSW State Election through the [AVA NSW Election Platform](#). The AVA engaged with all political parties and key parliamentarians, both before and after the NSW election to raise awareness and seek Government action on the key issues facing the veterinary profession.

The AVA provided a [comprehensive submission](#) to the Inquiry. This AVA submission discussed the complex challenges and suggested strategies by individually addressing each of the Inquiry's terms of reference (TOR), including providing 16 vital recommendations. AVA's Drs Cristy Secombe and Dr Zachary Lederhose appeared as witnesses at the Inquiry hearing on the 30 August and their representations can be viewed on [YouTube \(Timestamp: 4h 42 minutes\)](#) or via the Inquiry [transcript](#). The AVA took some [questions on notice during the public hearing and were asked post-hearing a supplementary question](#) by the Committee.

Veterinary Workforce Shortage in NSW Inquiry Report

On 28 June 2024, the NSW Parliamentary Portfolio Committee 4 published its report for the *Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortages in NSW*. The AVA commends the NSW Parliament and the Committee for their thorough investigation and dedication to addressing the challenges faced by the veterinary profession.

The 166-page Inquiry report demonstrates a deep understanding of the profession's challenges and concerns by presenting 17 key findings and 34 actionable recommendations. The release of the Inquiry report was a positive moment for the veterinary profession and the report will have significant implications in NSW and across the country. The [AVA provided a formal response](#) to the Inquiry report, with the AVA expressing support for all the recommendations and emphasising strong support for 20 of them.

NSW Government Response to Inquiry Report Recommendations

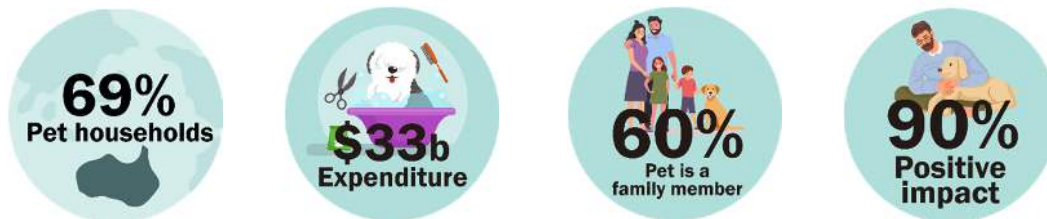
The [NSW Government responded to the Inquiry report](#) with strong endorsement by supporting or giving in-principle support to 33 of the 34 recommendations, while noting the remaining one. The AVA welcomed this positive NSW Government response and is eager to work with the NSW Government to translate these recommendations into tangible outcomes.

This AVA's 2025/26 Pre-Budget submission focuses on the on the critical priorities facing veterinarians in NSW and offers a range of recommendations underpinned by the Inquiry's recommendations and the NSW Government's responses.



State of the veterinary sector

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 in Australia and over \$10 billion in NSW.**²

The livestock industry in Australia is worth over \$34 billion annually and valued at \$8 billion in NSW³. 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.

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 animals 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.

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

² Animal 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

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Livestock industries value September 2023. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/agriculture/livestock-products-australia/sep-2023>



NSW Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations - Summary

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

Recommendation 1.1 Funding for the AVA wellness initiative (THRIVE)

The NSW Government commit to funding (\$3.6 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 psychological health and safety awareness training, mental health first aid, suicide prevention and counselling for veterinarians.

2. Build and retain veterinary workforce

Recommendation 2.1 Regional and rural relocation incentives

The NSW Government allocate funding to implement targeted financial incentives for veterinarians to relocate to regional and rural NSW, particularly those working with livestock, to address critical workforce shortages and support primary producers.

Recommendation 2.2 Student placement support

The NSW Government subsidies for accommodation and travel costs associated with students undertaking clinical placements in rural and regional areas.

Recommendation 2.3 Veterinary infrastructure funding

The NSW Government invest in veterinary infrastructure development that includes accommodation will assist in meeting this challenge. The AVA proposes that the Government establish a veterinary infrastructure subsidy available to rural and regional veterinary services businesses to help them include accommodation facilities within the veterinary hospital.

Recommendation 2.4 Recent Graduate Rural and Regional incentive funding

The NSW Government implement an incentive scheme that provides a financial payment to recent graduates who begin their veterinary careers in rural and regional areas. The incentive would be in 2 parts, firstly an initial payment that is aimed at supporting the relocation costs incurred by the recent graduate. A second payment would be available once a recent graduate had completed at least 5 years veterinary practice in a rural or regional area.

Recommendation 2.5 Childcare access

The NSW Government fund and implement targeted initiatives to address childcare challenges faced by veterinary professionals, with a focus on improving access to childcare.

Recommendation 2.6 Afterhours Services

The NSW Government provide resources to fund a think tank to develop an afterhours model that is sustainable for the profession and allows veterinary services to be delivered to the NSW community in both urban and rural areas 24/7, including the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services.

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

Recommendation 3.1 Veterinary services for wildlife

The NSW Government commit funding for a pilot program to private veterinary businesses to assist with the variable cost of delivery of veterinary services to Australia's wildlife.

Recommendation 3.2 Veterinary services for disaster impacted wildlife

The NSW Government to establish formal support arrangements for veterinary services provided to disaster-impacted wildlife.

Recommendation 3.3 Stray Animals and Pounds



The AVA urgently calls upon the NSW Government to fund the investigation and implementation of a state-wide consistent policy for the interaction between local government and veterinary practices in management of stray dogs and cats.

Recommendation 3.4 Biosecurity funding – Veterinarians on farms

In its funding of the biosecurity system the NSW Government commit to including increased specific investment in veterinary services (particularly rural and regional) and supporting delivery of veterinary services that deliver public good (e.g. getting veterinarians onto farms regularly to enhance biosecurity and animal welfare).

Recommendation 3.5 Biosecurity funding – Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) testing support

The NSW Government should commit to sustained funding and support for EAD preparedness initiatives as a proactive measure to safeguard animal health, public health, and the agricultural economy. This includes reinstating free veterinary-initiated laboratory testing for EAD-related disease investigations to remove financial disincentives for primary producers and encourage early and accurate disease reporting.

Recommendation 3.6 Low-income earners

The NSW Government to fund the investigation and implementation of strategies to ensure the veterinary care needs of animals in our community are effectively met for low-income earners that is means tested.



1 - 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 NSW Government support the extension of a suite of AVA veterinary specific mental health support programs.

AVA NSW 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission Recommendation

Recommendation 1.1 Funding for the AVA wellness initiative (THRIVE)

The NSW Government commit to funding (\$3.6 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 psychological health and safety awareness training, mental health first aid, suicide prevention and counselling for veterinarians.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

The burnout 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.

In October 2024, the AVA commissioned a report by the National Coronial Information System (NCIS) titled *Intentional Self-Harm Deaths of Veterinary Professionals*. The report revealed that between 2010 and 2021, 70 deaths due to intentional self-harm were reported to coroners in Australia or New Zealand, where the deceased was identified as a current or former veterinary professional based on NCIS occupation coding. **Of these reported intentional self-harm deaths, 22.9% occurred in NSW.**

Burnout 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.

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>



- 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, 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 wellness initiative that the AVA is championing. This framework encompasses the philosophies of prevent, promote and protect:

- Preventing harm and mental ill-health from psychosocial hazards in the industry;
- Promoting mental health by leveraging protective factors such as strengths, capabilities, and the rewards of work; and
- 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.

The AVA extensively detailed the burnout and mental health challenges facing the veterinary industry in its [submission](#), [public hearing attendance](#), and [response to questions on notice](#), for the [2023 Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortages in NSW](#).

To assist in addressing this, the AVA proposes a commitment from the NSW Government of \$3.6 million over a period of 4 years to support the extension of a suite of AVA veterinary specific mental health support programs. Here are the programs and services that would be provided with this funding:



- **Broadening the Cultivating Safe Teams Initiative:** Expansion of this pilot program would ensure that every veterinary workplace in Australia receives training focused on psychological health and safety, fostering a culture of well-being.
- **Industry-Specific Training:** Financial support to deliver tailored training around managing challenging client interactions, which can be significant stressors in the veterinary field.
- **Research and Data Collection:**
 - Investment in research that gathers more accurate data on suicide statistics within the profession, as well as broader research into industry-specific psychosocial hazards.
 - **Industry Health Checks:** Conducting periodic surveys, possibly annual or biennial, to assess the overall health of the veterinary industry and measure the impact of wellness initiatives.
- **Whole of Career Pathways Mentoring (peer to peer):** Providing mentorship throughout the career of veterinary professionals, from undergraduate students to retirees.
- **Addressing Psychosocial Hazards:** Developing a practical program tailored for veterinary businesses to assess and manage their specific psychosocial risks.
- **Mental Health Training & Support:** Specialised mental health training for veterinarians, veterinary nurses, and practice managers, including programs to improving workplace culture and support individuals for example the 24/7 Counselling Service: Expansion of the dedicated counselling service.
- **Veterinary-Focused Mental Health Education:** Creating campaigns and resources, led by the veterinary profession, to bolster veterinarian well-being, enhance career satisfaction, and promote the sustainability of the profession.

In essence, the funding of THRIVE would pave the way for a holistic approach to mental well-being in the veterinary sector, creating resilient professionals and ensuring the long-term health of the industry.

In appendix A the AVA have provided some estimated costs grouped into the identified areas in which the government could commit funding.

NSW Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortages in NSW Report Recommendations:

Veterinary Mental Health

Recommendation 10 That the NSW Government consider funding the Australian Veterinary Association to support its work developing mental health programs for veterinarians. (Government Response – Support in principle)

Recommendation 13 The Minister for Mental Health, in conjunction with the Minister for Agriculture, take steps to ensure suicide prevention programs are made available which are specifically targeted at veterinarians. (Government Response – Support in principle)

Recommendation 14 That the NSW Government examine data held by NSW government agencies regarding the suicide rate in the veterinary profession across the state over the last two decades, including all causal factors and develop a framework to better support mental health of veterinarians. (Government Response – Support in principle)

Public Behaviour and Education

Recommendation 9 That the NSW Government provide grants to appropriate organisations to raise awareness and educate clients about the impact of their behaviour on veterinarians. (Government Response – Support in principle)

Recommendation 28 That the NSW Government provide support for the Australian Veterinary Association to develop educational materials for pet owners containing information about



- how veterinary clinics operate
- how pet owners should budget for unexpected costs,
- how to create a positive relationship with the veterinary team,
- the potential benefits of pet insurance.

This information should be available in a range of community languages. (Government Response – Support in principle)



2 - 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.

AVA NSW 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations

Recommendation 2.1 Regional and rural relocation incentives

The NSW Government allocate funding to implement targeted financial incentives for veterinarians to relocate to regional and rural NSW, particularly those working with livestock, to address critical workforce shortages and support primary producers.

Recommendation 2.2 Student placement support

The NSW Government subsidies for accommodation and travel costs associated with students undertaking clinical placements in rural and regional areas.

Recommendation 2.3 Veterinary infrastructure funding

The NSW Government invest in veterinary infrastructure development that includes accommodation will assist in meeting this challenge. The AVA proposes that the Government establish a veterinary infrastructure subsidy available to rural and regional veterinary services businesses to help them include accommodation facilities within the veterinary hospital.

Recommendation 2.4 Recent Graduate Rural and Regional incentive funding

The NSW Government implement an incentive scheme that provides a financial payment to recent graduates who begin their veterinary careers in rural and regional areas. The incentive would be in 2 parts, firstly an initial payment that is aimed at supporting the relocation costs incurred by the recent graduate. A second payment would be available once a recent graduate had completed at least 5 years veterinary practice in a rural or regional area.

Recommendation 2.5 Childcare access

The NSW Government fund and implement targeted initiatives to address childcare challenges faced by veterinary professionals, with a focus on improving access to childcare.

Recommendation 2.6 Afterhours Services

The NSW Government provide resources to fund a think tank to develop an afterhours model that is sustainable for the profession and allows veterinary services to be delivered to the NSW community in both urban and rural areas 24/7, including the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Rural and regional NSW 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
- There is an increased risk to human health and well-being



The substantial value of livestock farming to the NSW 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).⁹

To support the long-term viability of rural and regional veterinary practices, the NSW Government needs to provide proactive support to veterinarians and veterinary practices.

Financial incentives for relocation to veterinary practice in rural and regional areas

The veterinary profession in regional and rural NSW is confronting significant workforce shortages, leading to challenges in animal care and public health. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including support services and financial incentives to attract and retain veterinary professionals in rural and regional NSW.

The Australian Veterinary Association's 2023/24 Workforce Survey indicates that 55% of veterinary positions in regional NSW remained vacant for more than 12 months. Factors such as professional burnout, mental health challenges, and limited access to childcare and housing exacerbate recruitment and retention difficulties in rural regions.

The NSW Inquiry into Veterinary workforce shortages in NSW recognised this in recommendation 15: *That the NSW Government considers providing financial incentives for veterinarians who work with livestock, to ensure an adequate number of large animal practitioners are available to support primary producers in regional areas.* In its response, the NSW Government expressed in-principal support for this recommendation 15, which acknowledges the importance of addressing workforce shortages in these vital areas through financial incentives.

The December 2024 expansion of the [NSW Government's Welcome Experience program](#) to include veterinary professionals is a positive development. This initiative assists essential workers such as veterinary professionals in relocating and settling into regional communities by providing information and referrals for areas like housing, education, and social connections.

⁹ Australian Veterinary Association. Veterinary Workforce Survey. 2021. Available from: <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>



While the Welcome Experience addresses relocation information and connection aspects, implementing financial incentives remains crucial to effectively attract and retain veterinary professionals in rural and regional NSW to ensure comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

Veterinary student placements in rural and regional areas

The [Australian Universities Accord final report](#) recognises that it is essential to increase the skilled rural workforce in the veterinary profession to ensure that all Australian communities enjoy the benefits of good animal health and welfare, and this starts at university.

The Australian accreditation standards require veterinary students complete 950 hours of placement outside of teaching periods, which exceeds the requirements of many other degrees. This 'placement poverty' hinders veterinary students, particularly affecting their ability to pursue placements in rural and regional areas due to the significant financial burden associated with travel and accommodation expenses, which receive no financial support from universities. The economic challenges limit the frequency of students' placements in these rural and regional veterinary practices areas, reducing their exposure to the benefits of rural and regional veterinary practices. There is evidence that if veterinary students are provided with opportunities for rural placements, they are likely to return to these areas for work after graduation. However, the current lack of support and the resultant economic constraints may deter students from considering rural and regional veterinary practice as a viable career path.

NSW Government subsidies for accommodation and travel costs associated with students undertaking clinical placements in rural and regional areas will increase the number of students that are properly exposed to veterinary practice in these areas and increase the likelihood that they will see these regions as attractive options upon graduation.

Infrastructure grants for veterinary practices providing accommodation

The availability of accommodation is a significant issue for both students seeking clinical placements in regional areas and for recent graduates who seek to begin their veterinary careers in regional practice. Housing issues in regions can be difficult to manage and there are often competing priorities. One approach is to quarantine accommodation in regional areas for veterinary services and to have it tied to local veterinary practices.

State/territory government support for veterinary infrastructure development that includes accommodation will assist in meeting this challenge. The AVA proposes that the NSW Government establish a veterinary infrastructure subsidy available to rural and regional veterinary services businesses to help them include accommodation facilities within the veterinary hospital.

Incentives for recent graduates to practice in rural and regional areas

Veterinary salaries are low in relation to other similar professions, this is more so for recent graduates whose low starting salaries are compounded by them emerging from university with significant education debts.

The AVA proposes that the NSW Government implement an incentive scheme that provides a financial payment to recent graduates who begin their veterinary careers in rural and regional areas. The incentive would be in two parts, firstly an initial payment that is aimed at supporting the relocation costs incurred by the recent graduate. A second payment would be available once a recent graduate has completed at least 5 years veterinary practice in a rural or regional area. This is to encourage the veterinarians to stay in the region long enough to 'put down some roots'.



Childcare placements

For veterinarians to return to work and remain in the workforce, childcare needs to be available during veterinary working hours and accessible on a veterinary income.

Veterinarians need to be considered as essential workers and provided the same opportunities as other essential workers. Childcare availability and the cost of childcare relative to veterinary income are significant concerns for veterinarians and veterinary nurses, particularly when returning to work.

A comprehensive approach, inclusive of both industry and government supported initiatives, is essential to effectively address the challenges and facilitate access to childcare for veterinary professionals. Proposed initiatives that could be considered by Government include:

- Priority childcare placements: A potential pathway could be to include essential workers, like veterinarians, priority access to childcare placements.
- Tax incentives: Offering tax breaks and other mechanisms to support veterinarians in obtaining childcare is an approach worthy of further investigation to address some of the challenges.
- Childcare in rural areas: Government initiatives to enhance childcare facilities in rural areas would significantly benefit veterinarians working in these regions.
- Government Intervention: While government funding can act as a catalyst for veterinarians to re-join the workforce, it's imperative to understand that monetary aid alone is insufficient. Ideally, a portion of such funding should be channelled towards training and supporting the veterinary sector to assist parents to re-enter the profession, for example the AVA Return to Work program.

After-hours Services

The veterinary profession in NSW is regulated to only accept an animal for veterinary care if they are available for ongoing care of the animal, or if not available, to make arrangements for another veterinarian to take over care of the animal. This requires the provision of care outside business hours. The regulations encourage veterinary practices who do not provide an afterhours service to have formal arrangements with practices that do. It is clear that while after-hours services are crucial, the current models present significant challenges, particularly in terms of practitioner well-being, financial viability, and consistent delivery of care.

While the AVA strongly supports the Inquiry into veterinary workforce shortages in NSW recommendation 3 to *develop a clearer regulatory framework for the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services and potentially help reduce the burden on the veterinary workforce*. This recommendation on telemedicine is only one part of the solution needed with respect to afterhours veterinary services. Telemedicine and tele-triage can assist in managing the demand for afterhours veterinary care and help ensure that veterinarians are only called out to cases that genuinely cannot wait until regular business hours.

The AVA recommends the NSW Government provide resources to fund a think tank to develop an afterhours model that is sustainable for the profession and allows veterinary services to be delivered to the NSW community in both urban and rural areas 24/7, including the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services.

NSW Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortages in NSW Report Recommendations:

Afterhours and provision of telehealth

Recommendation 3 That the NSW Government develop a clearer regulatory framework for the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services and



potentially help reduce the burden on the veterinary workforce. ([Government Response – Support in principle](#))

Childcare

Recommendation 8 That the NSW Government continue to work with the Australian Government to increase the availability of childcare places, particularly in regional and rural areas. ([Government Response – Support](#))

Incentives for large animal and government veterinarians in regional NSW

Recommendation 15 That the NSW Government considers providing financial incentives for veterinarians who work with livestock, to ensure an adequate number of large animal practitioners are available to support primary producers in regional areas. ([Government Response – Support in principle](#))

Recommendation 18 That the NSW Government to consider providing incentives for veterinarians to take up NSW Local Land Service veterinary roles in regions where recruitment has been difficult. ([Government Response – Support](#))

Veterinary Student Support

Recommendation 16 That the NSW Government advocate for the Australian Government to trial incentives, including waiving HECS debt, to attract and retain veterinarians in New South Wales, and particularly in rural and in regional areas. ([Government Response – Support](#))

Recommendation 17 That the NSW Government provide funding for targeted grants to enhance mentoring for first year graduates in private practice in New South Wales, and particularly in areas outside of large cities. ([Government Response – Support in principle](#))



3 - Sustainability of veterinary services – recouping the costs 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 NSW Government commit to funding delivery of private veterinary services that are for the public good, particularly in the areas of biosecurity, veterinary services for wildlife, veterinary services for stray animals, and support to low-income earners.

AVA NSW 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations

Recommendation 3.1 Veterinary services for wildlife

The NSW Government commit funding for a pilot program to private veterinary businesses to assist with the variable cost of delivery of veterinary services to Australia's wildlife.

Recommendation 3.2 Veterinary services for disaster impacted wildlife

The NSW Government to establish formal support arrangements for veterinary services provided to disaster-impacted wildlife.

Recommendation 3.3 Stray Animals and Pounds

The AVA urgently calls upon the NSW Government to fund the investigation and implementation of a state-wide consistent policy for the interaction between local government and veterinary practices in management of stray dogs and cats.

Recommendation 3.4 Biosecurity funding – Veterinarians on farms

In its funding of the biosecurity system the NSW Government commit to including increased specific investment in veterinary services (particularly rural and regional) and supporting delivery of veterinary services that deliver public good (e.g. getting veterinarians onto farms regularly to enhance biosecurity and animal welfare).

Recommendation 3.5 Biosecurity funding – Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) testing support

The NSW Government should commit to sustained funding and support for EAD preparedness initiatives as a proactive measure to safeguard animal health, public health, and the agricultural economy. This includes reinstating free veterinary-initiated laboratory testing for EAD-related disease investigations to remove financial disincentives for primary producers and encourage early and accurate disease reporting.

Recommendation 3.6 Low-income earners

The NSW Government to fund the investigation and implementation of strategies to ensure the veterinary care needs of animals in our community are effectively met for low-income earners that is means tested.

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 an extensive list that includes:

- Treatment obligations for pain and suffering;



- Treatment of unowned wildlife;
- Receiving and treating stray animals;
- Biosecurity obligations such as passive surveillance, diagnostic and reporting obligations;
- Discounted desexing for low income earners to assist with animal population control;
- Treatment of animals in an emergency or 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. The 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 workforce 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 facilitate the provision of 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.

Finding 3 of the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage recognised these needs; *That veterinarians provide a significant public good by providing services to injured wildlife, and stray, lost and homeless animals that is not currently appropriately recompensed by the NSW Government.*

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. However, the rising cost of providing veterinary care to wildlife is rapidly becoming unsustainable.

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.¹⁰ The same study found that the pro bono nature of wildlife care limited the timeliness and extent of the care able to be delivered.

NSW Government support arrangements for disaster impacted wildlife is currently 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 with limited support from animal rescue charity organisations. To ensure wildlife is sufficiently supported, the AVA strongly believes that arrangements for veterinary services to disaster impacted wildlife needs to be clearly recognised within NSW disaster response and recovery arrangements. 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.

¹⁰ B Orr, A Tribe. Animal welfare implications of treating wildlife in Australian veterinary practices. Australian Veterinary Journal. 2018;96:475-480.



The Crown (i.e NSW Government) owns the Australian wildlife and these protected animals are considered the property of the State or Crown. The public expects that Australian 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 to injured or diseased wildlife.

Stray Animals and Council Pounds

Veterinary practices often are the first port of call for many people who have found stray dogs, cats or litters as well other community requirements in respect to animal care and reliable information. The community has a perception and/or preference to bring stray dogs and cats to veterinary practices instead of direct to council rangers and pounds through the important and regulated role of veterinarians for animal health and welfare and public safety.

The issues with veterinary practices often being the entry point for strays in the rehoming process but without the support to do so, is clearly demonstrated in the results from the September 2022 AVA survey¹¹: Strays and veterinary practices engagement with NSW councils/pounds. The survey results include:

- 96% of respondents advise they receive stray dogs and cats at their veterinary practices.
- 81% advised they don't receive payment for looking after strays.
- 92% advised the payment does not cover the practices full costs for housing and treating strays.

The provision of services by council pounds that are accessible to the public to meet these needs is extremely challenging. Some municipalities work with private veterinary practices for those veterinary practices to provide care and temporary housing where council pounds are not open or accessible when required by the public. However, these arrangements are not consistent across all municipalities (as detailed in the AVA Submission to NSW Rehoming Practices Review¹²).

Of note, these issues were reflected in the October 2024 NSW Parliamentary Portfolio Committee No. 8, report from the Inquiry into Pounds in NSW¹³. The report examined these issues and acknowledged the:

- *the lack of recompense provided to vets who board and treat stray animals presented to them by members of the public, and cost shifting from government authorities to veterinary clinics.*³⁶ The committee also recognised that 'local government authorities vary in their interpretation of the Companion Animals Act 1998 and how they manage strays
- *that veterinarians generally do not receive payment for the care of stray animals, and that if payment is provided, it does not cover the full cost of housing and treatment.*

The AVA urgently calls upon the NSW Government to fund the investigation and implementation of a state-wide consistent policy for the interaction between local government and veterinary practices in management of stray dogs and cats. This policy needs to address the issues identified with the stray animal intake process to councils, the management of injured strays, including reimbursement for veterinary treatment, housing, and arrangements addressing the associated financial impacts on veterinary practices for receiving, treating, and housing stray animals.

¹¹ <https://www.ava.com.au/news/get-involved/strays-and-veterinary-practices-engagement-with-nsw-councilspounds/>

¹² https://www.ava.com.au/globalassets/authors/ava_submission_draft-report-rehoming-of-companion-animals-in-nsw.pdf

¹³ <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/2970/Report%20No.%202%20-%20Portfolio%20Committee%20No.%208%20-%20Customer%20Service%20-%20Pounds%20in%20New%20South%20Wales.pdf>



Biosecurity

The Australian *Red Meat Advisory Council (RMAC)*¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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,¹⁶ 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 NSW 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.

In 2023, the NSW Government introduced a suite of Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) preparedness initiatives to enhance early detection and response capabilities. These initiatives included:

- **Free veterinary laboratory testing** for animal disease investigations conducted by veterinarians on livestock susceptible to foot-and-mouth disease.
- **Free EAD surveillance kits** for NSW veterinarians, containing essential personal protective equipment (PPE), disease sampling tools, and autopsy equipment.

These measures provided significant support to veterinarians, enabling timely and thorough disease investigations while reducing financial and logistical barriers. They also played a pivotal role in strengthening biosecurity and ensuring rapid responses to emerging threats.

However, these initiatives are no longer available, creating a critical gap in resources for veterinarians tasked with surveying and managing potential EAD cases. Reinstating and maintaining these programs will strengthen NSW's biosecurity framework and empower veterinarians, who are on the frontline of animal health, to manage and respond to EAD threats effectively.

Animal health, welfare and biosecurity are significant public goods that are valued by our community. Government support, at all levels, is needed to ensure that these public goods continue to be delivered. A critical element of this support is providing veterinarians with EAD testing resources to enable timely and accurate disease detection and response. The key is getting veterinary expertise onto farms to undertake passive biosecurity surveillance, supported by accessible EAD testing, and to work with primary producers to improve farm planning and practices. This integrated approach strengthens our biosecurity framework and protects the health of animals, people, and the economy.

¹⁴ 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>

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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



Low-Income Earners

Many initiatives such as subsidised veterinary care programs, mobile clinics, education campaigns, and collaborations between animal welfare organisations and veterinarians are undertaken with the aim to improve access to veterinary care for all animal guardians, regardless of income level.

These initiatives rely heavily on the support and contribution from private veterinarians, often in the form of significantly subsidised or fully pro-bono services. The private veterinary sector is unable to continue to sustain the delivery of these services.

The implementation of community centred veterinary practice with private-public collaboration would reduce pressures on mainstream veterinary practice. With public funded support, this would utilise existing infrastructure and workforce. Retention of professionals working within the sector would be improved by such initiatives – improving the sustainability of the sector overall.

The AVA's top welfare objective is that any animal that is under human care in Australia should be able to access veterinary care, and strategies must address the barriers to veterinary care. Strategies to improve the sustainability of the profession through supporting the workforce will improve access to veterinary care.

For veterinarians working in private practices or charities to be able to provide the community with minimum standards of animal health and welfare and public health, there needs to be an ability for these services and standards to be government supported or paid by the animal owner. Animal welfare groups employing paid or volunteer veterinarians, largely funded by private donations, have tried to meet this need.

The AVA supports investigating strategies to ensure the veterinary care needs of animals in our community are effectively met for low-income earners that is means tested and pensioners.

The challenge is to support demand, whilst maintaining the viability of local veterinary practices to continue to service the needs of the community. The NSW Government must ensure that any subsidisation doesn't undercut local veterinary practices and reduce their financial viability.

NSW Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortages in NSW Report Recommendations:

Wildlife

Recommendation 1 That the NSW Government provide dedicated, ongoing funding for the provision of veterinary services to wildlife, including for: wildlife rescue organisations, existing wildlife hospitals, support the expansion of wildlife units at other hospitals, and private veterinary practices to contribute to reasonable costs for services. (Government Response – Noted)

Stray animals and pounds

Recommendation 2 That the NSW Government consider amending the Companion Animals Act 1998 to: ensure local government authorities collect stray animals from licensed veterinary clinics and ensure that appropriate funding is provided to local government authorities to ensure that there is a consistent interpretation of the Act across all local government areas. (Government Response – Support in principle)

Low-income earners

Recommendation 31 That the NSW Government investigate strategies to best ensure veterinary care for pet owners particularly low-income earners can be made more affordable. (Government Response – Support in principle)

Recommendation 32 That the NSW Government investigate providing subsidised vet care to low-income earners, pensioner and animal rescue groups. (Government Response – Support in principle)

Recommendation 33 That the NSW Government provide funding to animal rescue organisations and the university sector to increase subsidised treatments at their veterinary hospitals and provide



increased training opportunities for veterinary science students and others. (Government Response
- Support in principle)

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Appendix A: Mental Health Funding Estimated Costings Over 4 Years

Estimate costing ex GST

24/7 Counselling Service - outsourced	
Provision to include face-to-face debriefing sessions in workplaces for critical incidents	\$346,900
Research - outsourced	
Collect accurate data on suicide statistics in the veterinary profession; veterinarians and paraprofessionals.	\$55,100
Fully funded 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)	\$181,700
Staff resourcing over 4 years	\$167,800
Whole of career pathways mentoring - outsourced	
Expansion of the pilot program 100 mentoring pairs (veterinarians helping veterinarians to deal with common day issues that arise in every day practice, such as veterinary board investigations, negative client interactions, and ethical dilemmas).	\$550,600
Staff resourcing over 4 years	\$195,200
Cultivating Safe Teams (CST) - beyond the AVA pilot program	
CST Aware Psychological health and safety awareness training sessions. For all individuals working in the veterinary profession. Estimated participation of 50% of veterinary businesses	\$1,189,300
'CST Action' Workplace Implementation Program. A 12-month program for workplace leaders and influencers who have completed the Psychological health and safety awareness training sessions and who wish to further embed the principles and learning into their workplace.	\$47,600
Staff resource to manage program (1FTE) over 4 years and travel costs	\$416,300
Veterinary business program - outsourced	
Practical program for veterinary businesses to work through and manage their business-specific psychosocial risks.	\$313,900
Staff resourcing over 4 years to manage stakeholders	\$58,600
Mental health first aid for veterinarians	
For 50% of NSW veterinarians (~2000)	\$79,300
Staff resource to manage stakeholders	\$33,000
TOTAL FUNDING ESTIMATE	\$3,635,300