



Animal Medicines Australia
ABN 76 116 948 344 | ACN 116 948 344
18 National Circuit
Barton ACT 2600, Australia
P: +61 2 6257 9022
animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au

28 February 2025

The Parliamentary Officer

Joint Committee on Mental Health and Wellbeing of Veterinarians in South Australia
GPO Box 572
ADELAIDE SA 5001

By email only: JCMHWV@parliament.sa.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of veterinarians in South Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of veterinarians in South Australia (the Inquiry).

Animal Medicines Australia (AMA) is the peak industry association representing the registrants and approval holders of veterinary medicines and animal health products in Australia. They are the local divisions of global innovators, manufacturers, formulators and registrants that supply essential veterinary medicines and animal health products that are critical to supporting Australia's \$34 billion livestock industry and the \$33 billion pet industry. Our members represent more than 90% of registered veterinary medicine sales in Australia.

AMA member companies play a vital role in Australia's food production, agricultural trade and biosecurity preparedness, as well as ensuring that veterinarians have access to the animal health products they require to maintain and improve the health and wellbeing of our pets, wildlife and competition animals. AMA members develop, register and supply innovative new medicines including vaccines and anti-infection medicines to prevent and control outbreaks of animal disease, as well as medicines and treatments that enable good health and wellbeing, and the production of food and fibre products that are safe for human consumption and use. Healthy animals are much less susceptible to disease and infection, and good animal health is essential to good animal welfare.

Animal Medicines Australia commends the South Australia Government's commitment to addressing the challenges faced by the veterinary profession in SA and is pleased to provide the following comments on the Inquiry for consideration by the Joint Committee.

Key points

- Veterinary medicines are crucial tools used by veterinarians to support the health, welfare and wellbeing of livestock, pets, and other animals under human care.

- Veterinarians are essential for accessing medicines to prevent, manage and treat many animal diseases. Without adequate access to veterinary services, animal health and welfare may suffer from illnesses, injuries and diseases and sub-optimal treatments,
- AMA welcomes the opportunity to work with the SA Government to identify strategies for supporting the veterinary workforce and protect SA's livestock production and trade, as well as support SA's growing pet population.
- AMA welcomes the opportunity to work with the SA Government to identify strategies for attracting and retaining veterinarians in SA.
- AMA would welcome consultation on opportunities to develop a sustainable public funding model for the veterinary services in areas of public need, including animal welfare, biosecurity, population control, wildlife health and emergency response services in response to natural disasters.

Access to animal health services

Veterinarians provide essential primary care to Australia's livestock, pets and wildlife, as well as being critical to preventing and responding to potential disease incursions that threaten to impact Australia's \$34 billion livestock and \$33 billion pet industries. Every animal in Australia should have ready access to veterinary care when required.

Livestock health and wellbeing is inextricably linked with the success and sustainability of SA farms. High standards of animal health and wellbeing not only ensure livestock welfare meets community expectations but also translates directly into improved productivity and environmental outcomes, and reduced morbidity and mortality.

Australia produces significantly more food than we consume – with around 70% of total agricultural production exported overseas.¹ Every year, each Australian farmer produces enough food for 600 people² and it has been estimated that, while our population sits at around 26 million, 61 million people will eat food produced in Australia.³

Healthy animals produce more meat, milk and eggs – enabling farmers to meet the increasing demand for animal protein with fewer resources, while minimising emissions.

Animal diseases are, however, a direct threat to healthy diets, making nutrient-dense food more scarce and more expensive. The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) estimates that more than 20% of animal production worldwide is lost as a direct result of disease.⁴ Thanks in large part to the efforts of livestock and poultry producers, as well as veterinarians, Australia remains free from all WOA Official Diseases – including foot and mouth disease, bovine spongiform encephalitis (mad cow disease) and African Swine Fever.

Maintaining and improving access to animal health products is critical to ensure that all livestock receive the best standard of care, minimising the incidence of disease and injury. As for human medicines, some animal health products require a prescription, for example antimicrobials, some classes of pain medication and vaccines. Furthermore, some product classes, such as parasiticides and antimicrobials, require appropriate product stewardship by farmers and veterinarians to prolong their effectiveness and ensure good outcomes for animals, now and in the future. Without ready access to veterinary services, the ability for farmers to access these products is at risk and poses significant animal health and welfare consequences, as well as potential biosecurity risks.

The COVID19 pandemic highlighted just how important it is to prevent infectious diseases in both humans and animals – livestock, wildlife and our pets. It is estimated that around 60 per cent of

¹ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: Agriculture and trade; <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/trade-investment/trade-at-a-glance/trade-at-a-glance-2015/agriculture-and-food-trade>

² Australian Farmers: Farm Facts; <https://farmers.org.au/farm-facts/>

³ The Conversation: How many people can Australia feed? <https://theconversation.com/how-many-people-can-australia-feed-76460>

⁴ World Organisation for Animal Health: Veterinary Services; https://www.woah.org/fileadmin/Home/eng/Media_Center/docs/pdf/VS-FINAL-EN.pdf

infectious diseases are zoonotic – that is, they are spread between animals and people.⁵ Strong biosecurity practices, including hygienic animal husbandry practices, antimicrobial resistance management and vaccination programs are key to a One Health approach to disease prevention and preparedness.⁶

From 2020 to 2022, pet ownership reached new heights in Australia as new owners took advantage of the opportunity afforded by flexible work from requirements imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. AMA's *Pets in Australia* survey found that an estimated 28.7 million pets are now calling home to around 6.9 million households in Australia.⁷ This includes more than 450 000 dogs and 375 000 cats in SA.

Having ready access to the tools and innovative technologies necessary to keep animals healthy, via an extensive, sustainable veterinary sector, is key to sustainable and resilient livestock and companion animal sectors in Australia, with subsequent environmental, economic and social benefits.

The veterinary workforce shortage

The veterinary workforce shortage is evident across all sectors, including livestock and companion animal clinical practice, research and academia, industry, government and pathology. These shortages pose significant challenges not just for animal health outcomes but also for food production and trade, innovation, environmental outcomes and biosecurity.

Although in 2021, veterinarians were included on the Priority Migration Skilled Occupation List, meaning that employer-sponsored nomination and visa applications for veterinarians will be given priority processing, veterinarians remain an occupation considered to be in shortage in the 2023 Skills Priority List report.⁸ In 2022, for the first time, veterinary nurses were also assessed as being in shortage.

As detailed by the Australian Veterinary Association, the drivers behind the veterinary workforce shortage are varied and complex. While a long-term decline in demand in the livestock sector has resulted in a lack of available veterinary services in rural areas, the rapid increased demand resulting from a growth in pet ownership has also resulted in a lack of capacity in the companion animal sector.

The challenges associated with maintaining a sustainable workforce are equally varied and complex. Similar to human health services, the provision of veterinary services is essential to ensuring good animal health and welfare, ready supply of food and fibre, and maintenance of biosecurity and public health. In contrast to human health services, however, the veterinary profession relies almost entirely on private funding, with little public funding provided.

The impacts of COVID-19 on the movement of veterinarians around Australia and internationally exacerbated the workforce shortage – particularly in regional and rural areas. AMA supports the provision of further support to attract and retain veterinarians, particularly in rural and regional areas. Expanding existing mechanisms aimed at sustaining medical and paramedical workers in rural areas to include veterinarians, veterinary nurses and technicians and other support staff, under a One Health approach to healthcare, is recommended.

Meeting the challenges facing the sector in retaining and maintaining a sustainable workforce, as well as providing better support models for veterinary care and educating the community regarding appropriate behaviour in veterinary practices, will assist in alleviating some of the pressure on veterinary services and contribute to improved mental wellbeing of veterinary staff.

AMA recommends extending the regulatory framework to include registration of the broader veterinary care team (including veterinary nurses and other para-veterinary staff) by the Veterinary Surgeons

⁵ UN Environment Programme. Preventing the next pandemic - Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission: https://www.unep.org/resources/report/preventing-future-zoonotic-disease-outbreaks-protecting-environment-animals-and?_ga=2.108792130.1749639790.1643851599-340431516.1643851599

⁶ Australian Pork. Sustainability Framework: https://australianpork.com.au/sites/default/files/2022-03/APL_Sustainability_Framework_Web.pdf

⁷ Animal Medicines Australia. Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people:

<https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/report/pets-in-australia-a-national-survey-of-pets-and-people-2/>

⁸ National Skills Commission. Skills Priority List: <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/download/19475/skills-priority-list-key-findings-report-2023/2205/2023-spl-key-findings-report/pdf>

Board of South Australia. Registration of the entire veterinary team would facilitate the establishment of professional standards for the broader veterinary care team to work under the supervision of registered veterinarians. Expanding the capacity for the entire veterinary care team to provide animal health care services would improve the efficiency of the care team, attract additional staff into veterinary nursing and para-professional roles by providing desirable career opportunities and relieve pressure from veterinarians.

Concurrently, Australia faces increasing biosecurity threats, including foot and mouth disease (FMD), lumpy skin disease (LSD), African swine fever (ASF) and high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI), as well as zoonotic threats from diseases such as Japanese encephalitis virus (JEV). Efforts to support and increase the number of rural and regional veterinarians are essential to protect SA's agricultural production and trade sectors, and rural communities. AMA would welcome consultation on opportunities to develop a sustainable public funding model for the veterinary services in areas of public need, including animal welfare, biosecurity, population control, wildlife health and emergency response services in response to natural disasters.

As our community emerges from the pandemic, new pressures and challenges are also emerging for pet owners. AMA's *Pets in Australia* survey continues to find that veterinarians are seen as the most trusted source of advice for pet health issues – with 84% of dog owners and 69% of cat owners taking their animals to the vet in the last 12 months. Nevertheless, around 68% of pet owners reported they had considered *not* going to the vet when needed (or going less often) in the past 12 months - up significantly from an already high 55% in 2021. While most felt they had no need to take their pet to the vet, other barriers cited included a lack of available veterinary services.

To ensure that as many Australians as possible can access the myriad benefits associated with pet ownership, we seek a policy environment that facilitates responsible pet ownership practices. Ensuing access to veterinary services for SA's growing pet population will be essential to achieving this goal.

Mental wellbeing in the veterinary profession

Compounded by prolonged and significant periods of generational and societal change, workload pressure, chronic underfunding and under-resourcing of the profession have contributed to poor mental health outcomes across the sector. The *Australian Veterinary Association Veterinary Wellness Strategy* found that 66.7% of people said they had experienced a mental health condition at some stage (compared with 61.8% of the general population) and that, tragically, veterinarians are up to four-times more likely than the general population to die by suicide – and twice as likely as other health professionals.⁹

Financial pressures, negative interactions with the community and on social media, as well as long working hours combined with high caseloads were highlighted as drivers for poor mental health outcomes in the veterinary profession.

The Australian Veterinary Association is working hard to improve these issues, by improving understanding of the pressures faced by the profession, provide support, and promote good workplace practices. A collaborative, innovative and whole-of-industry approach is required, however, to develop both short- and long-term strategies for addressing the drivers behind the declining veterinary workforce and meeting the challenges facing the sector in retaining and maintaining a sustainable workforce.

Supporting veterinarians and vulnerable pet owners

The relationship between humans and their pets, known as the human-animal bond, is a mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals, influenced by behaviours considered essential for the health and wellbeing of both. Human and animal health sectors, however, tend to operate in silos – meaning that policy development rarely delivers positive outcomes for both people and their pets.

⁹ Australian Veterinary Association. Veterinary Wellness Strategy:
<https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/resources/thrive/documents/ava-short-report-research-findings.pdf>

The veterinary profession experiences suicide rates significantly greater than those of the general population - veterinarians are four times more likely to die of suicide than the general population and twice as likely to die of suicide than any other healthcare profession. The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) commissioned a report by Superfriend, which recommended action across multiple areas including financial stress, working conditions and client relations. AMA supports the AVA's request for further government support to address the mental health crisis in the veterinary profession.

Currently, many veterinary practices and charities provide support and assistance to people in crisis situations, often in the form of "in-kind" labour. People experiencing crisis situations such as homelessness, domestic or family violence, or mental health crises, tend to be socially isolated and experiencing increased stress. A pet often provides significant emotional and social support and can even provide short-term health benefits – but, due to a lack of available support, pets can also act as a barrier to seeking assistance.

Veterinarians, veterinary nurses and administrative staff are generally not trained to work with vulnerable people who are experiencing crisis, grief, trauma or emotional distress. Veterinary social workers are trained in engaging with vulnerable people in highly stressful or emotional scenarios and can take responsibility for the human health aspects of veterinary care, thereby enhancing patient outcomes, improve mental health and social connection and provide critical support for veterinarians and other animal health providers.

AMA recommends the SA Government develop a mechanism for supporting the veterinary profession in the provision of support and veterinary services and ongoing care to vulnerable people and their pets.

Supporting emergency veterinary care for natural disasters and injured wildlife

As our climate changes, extreme weather events are occurring at an accelerated pace – with adverse impacts on the health and welfare of our pets, wildlife and livestock.

The Federal Government has committed to providing up to one billion dollars over five years for disaster risk reduction, through the Disaster Ready Fund (DRF), administered by the National Emergency Management Agency from 1 July 2023. Assistance is available for animal care during natural disasters through the DRF for livestock producers, as well as pet owners, including emergency care. However, these programs are linked to specific natural disaster events and may not be sufficient for the increasingly frequent extreme weather events, particularly in regional and rural areas, and for severe events not declared as 'disasters.'

The veterinary sector bears significant economic costs (often in the form of "in-kind" labour) in maintaining animal health and welfare on behalf of the broader overall community – particularly during natural disasters or by caring for unowned animals (e.g. wildlife and strays). Veterinarians have a legal responsibility to provide care for unowned animals and not only forego their usual income but also bear the cost of labour and materials associated with that care – in a manner that is not replicated in any other sector.

AMA supports the Australian Veterinary Association's recommendation to develop a national animal disaster fund to allow consistent secure payment for veterinary services delivered in natural disasters and develop a mechanism for supporting veterinarians providing veterinary care to unowned animals (outside of natural disasters), including Australia's unique wildlife. This could be modelled on a similar process to that currently being implemented as a part of the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement (EADRA) program – whereby the relevant costs and logistical arrangements are agreed with the private veterinary sector and payment of funds etc. is activated as required.

In Summary:

Animal Medicines Australia commends the Government's commitment to addressing the mental health and wellbeing of veterinarians in South Australia.

Efforts to support the veterinary workforce are essential to protect SA's livestock production and trade, as well as to support the growing pet population.

Animal Medicines Australia recommends the SA Government work with key stakeholders, including the animal health sector, to explore opportunities for attracting and retaining veterinarians and support staff in SA, including developing a sustainable public funding model for veterinary services in areas of public interest and extending the regulatory framework to include the broader veterinary care team.

If we can provide further information at any time, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Katie Asplin', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr Katie Asplin

Director, Animal Health Policy and Engagement