



# AVA Federal Government Pre-Budget Submission (May 2023 Budget)

Submission of the  
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

January 2023

## 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 national voice, education, community, and support.

### Executive summary

- Australia's veterinary professionals deliver an essential service in our rural and regional communities on commercial farms, in our metropolitan communities caring for our domestic pets, and in areas of community need such as wildlife, stray and feral animals.
- Vets are particularly vital for the agriculture sector which contributed \$71 billion to the Australian economy in 2020-21. This includes detecting and managing biosecurity threats, which are increasing in frequency.
  - Globally, disease emergence is becoming a more frequent event with numerous pathogens which spread from animal to humans being detected over the past three decades. This is driven by stresses at the human, animal, and environmental interface as a consequence of human activity such as land use changes, pollution, and climate change.
  - Over 60 per cent of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, including SARS-CoV-2, resulting from disease spill-over from animals. Recent Australian experiences with emerging zoonotic and animal-related diseases such as Japanese Encephalitis, Monkeypox and Avian Influenza demonstrate these challenges.
- Vets are highly valued and trusted by the communities they serve, **however there is a critical shortage of veterinarians in Australia.** This shortage is significantly more acute in rural and regional areas. Regional practices have in recent years been closing clinics because of a lack of veterinary staff.
- Lack of adequate supply of veterinarians has direct negative flow on effects to biosecurity, animal health and welfare, and human health. The sustainability of veterinary service provision is under threat from decades of labour underinvestment, coupled with the cost of delivery of 21<sup>st</sup> century veterinary care and the situation in regional areas is increasingly untenable.
- If Australian communities are to enjoy the benefits of modern standards of animal health and welfare and minimal animal-human disease transfer, investment in the veterinary profession is needed to ensure that these services can be sustainably provided.



## Recommendations

### 1. Attract more veterinarians to regional communities:

Introduce a Rural Bonding Scheme (HECS Forgiveness Scheme) for graduate veterinarians. The AVA estimates that this would cost \$19.23 million over four years (\$4.80 million per annum) and would wipe the HECS debt of 80 new graduates per year, boosting the veterinary workforce in these critically important regions.

### 2. Prioritise veterinary workforce sustainability

Invest in better data collection, analysis and workforce planning to ensure that future veterinary demand is matched by supply in a way that provides sufficient veterinarians, whilst realising the return on investment from veterinary training. Australia's veterinary workforce capacity should be regularly audited against the present and future risks to Australia's animal industries, and any deficits addressed.

### 3. Formalise the role of veterinarians in biosecurity policy through funding models:

The Australian government commit to perpetually funding the biosecurity system through a long-term sustainable, reviewable funding arrangement for biosecurity, including increasing specific investment in veterinary services, particularly rural and regional. Increased national 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.

### 4. Veterinary professionals – at greater risk of poor mental health

Sectoral support of the veterinary profession (\$3 million over four years) to establish a national veterinary profession led approach to improve veterinarian wellbeing and improve career satisfaction and sustainability via veterinary-focused mental health education campaigns, whole career mentoring/support and an accessible 24/7 veterinary friendly counselling service.

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# 1. Attract more veterinarians to regional communities

## The Issue

The work of veterinary professionals impacts the daily lives of Australians and their animals in a multitude of ways. The contribution veterinarians make to the community is highly valued, and significantly contributes to the social license of animal industries to operate.

Similar to human health care, delivery of modern veterinary care is costly, and the veterinary profession is suffering from marked underinvestment, predominantly around labour, as much of the work the profession performs is simply not paid for.

This is placing considerable pressure on the wellbeing of veterinarians and on the sustainability of the profession, which is now well evidenced<sup>1</sup>. If Australian society is to continue to rely upon modern standards of animal health and welfare, made feasible by modern standards of veterinary practice, investment in the veterinary profession is needed to ensure that these services can be sustainably provided.

The underinvestment in the profession has resulted in the current veterinary workforce shortage through high levels of attrition and severe mental health issues and risks the continuance and quality of Australian animal health.

Australia's veterinary workforce is currently characterised by:

- Low rates of remuneration compared to other professions such as medicine, engineering, and dentistry.<sup>2</sup>
- Significant educational debt as well as continued costs to remain registered and competent.
- Difficult working conditions combined with the above, makes the industry an unattractive one financially to remain in long-term.
- High rates of burnout, stress, and negative mental health outcomes.

Left unchecked, this has the potential to lead to the collapse of the sector, which poses significant risks to the community at large.

Further, with pets as family members in almost 70% of Australian homes<sup>3</sup>, the impact on human health and wellbeing is a significant public health benefit.

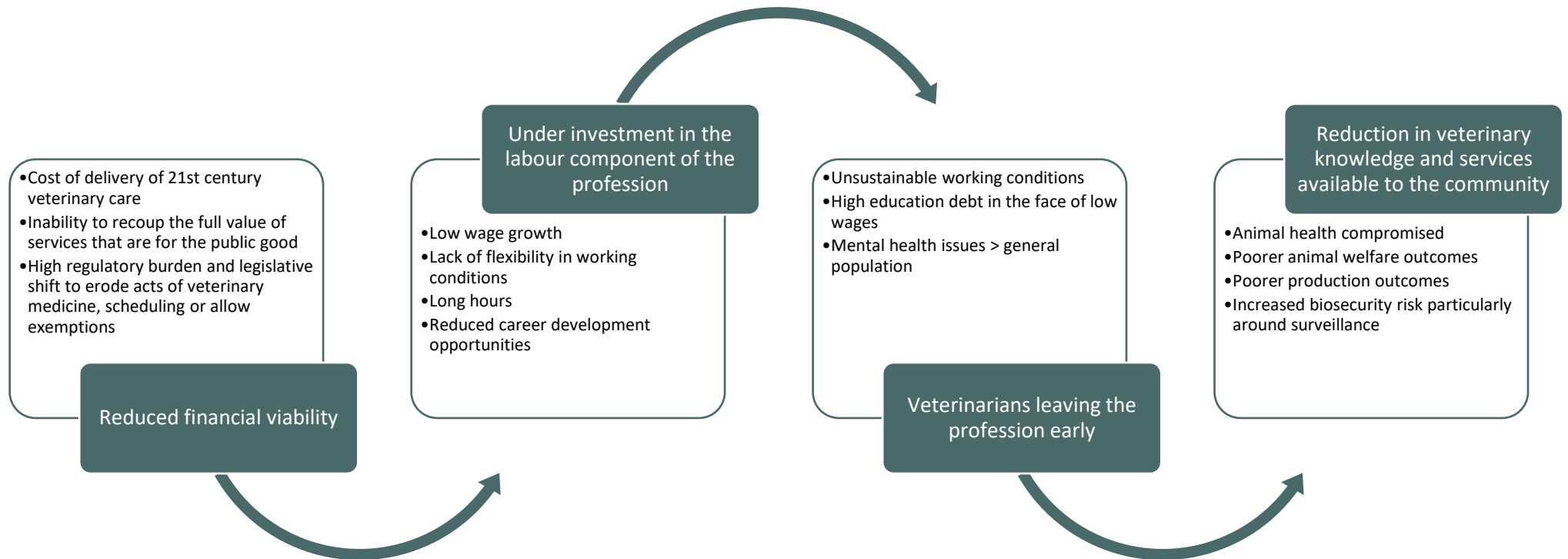
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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ava.com.au/wellness/>

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

<sup>3</sup> AMA (2021) Pets and the Pandemic: as social research snapshot of pets and people in the COVID-19 era (<https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/report/pets-and-the-pandemic-a-social-research-snapshot-of-pets-and-people-in-the-covid-19-era-2/>)

Figure 1 – Cycle of underinvestment in veterinary services



## The Impact: Evidence and Data

The veterinary workforce is currently entering its seventh year of a workforce shortage<sup>4</sup>. This shortage existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and was exacerbated by it.

It is also clear that this shortage is significantly more acute in rural and regional areas. Regional practices have in recent years been closing clinics because of a lack of veterinary staff.

The AVA conducts regular surveys of the veterinary workforce.

- The AVA 2021 Workforce Survey Report notes that **30.64% of veterinary job vacancies took more than 12 months to fill or were still not filled at the time of the survey.**
- Looking more broadly at vacancies taking over 6 months to fill, this accounted for **43.12% of vacancies.** This is up from 34% vacancies in the 2018 survey<sup>5,6</sup>.
- The workforce shortage has also been widely reported in the media, particularly in rural Queensland regions. [This article](#) in the ABC highlights the significant mental health challenges faced by vets as the workforce shortage pressures are mounting.

Investigating the 2021 data further shows that the situation is more acute in mixed practices. Mixed practices are those which service both small animals and production animals. They are generally located in rural and regional areas.

Table 2 - Percentage of Vacancies Remaining Unfilled by practice type

	Small animal	Equine only	Mixed practice & Production	Other
<b>less than 3 months</b>	20.96%	37.50%	19.14%	18.36%
<b>3-6 months</b>	18.84%	22.50%	21.72%	14.84%
<b>6-9 months</b>	8.65%	3.75%	6.45%	6.64%
<b>9-12 months</b>	4.65%	1.25%	5.59%	5.08%
<b>More than 12 months or still not filled</b>	<b>29.77%</b>	<b>25.00%</b>	<b>34.41%</b>	<b>29.69%</b>
<b>I'm not sure</b>	17.13%	10.00%	12.69%	25.39%
<b>Total</b>	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
<b>Total sample size</b>	1226	80	465	256

<sup>4</sup> Source: 2007 – 2019 data from DESSFB; 2021 – 2022 data from NSC

<sup>5</sup> AVA (2021) Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 - Analysis Report (<https://www.ava.com.au/news/workforce-survey-2021/>)

<sup>6</sup> AVA (2019) Australian Veterinary Workforce Survey 2018 (<https://www.vetvoice.com.au/SysSiteAssets/veterinary-careers/ava-workforce-survey-2018.pdf>)



Financial pressures on recent graduate veterinarians are clear from salary data.

Following five to six years of study and often incurring six figure debts, QILT data shows graduates on low salaries that have barely kept up with inflation in recent years. Compared with other undergraduates who have undertaken a similar level of education, veterinarians are well behind.

Figure 2 - Veterinarian graduate starting salaries<sup>7</sup>

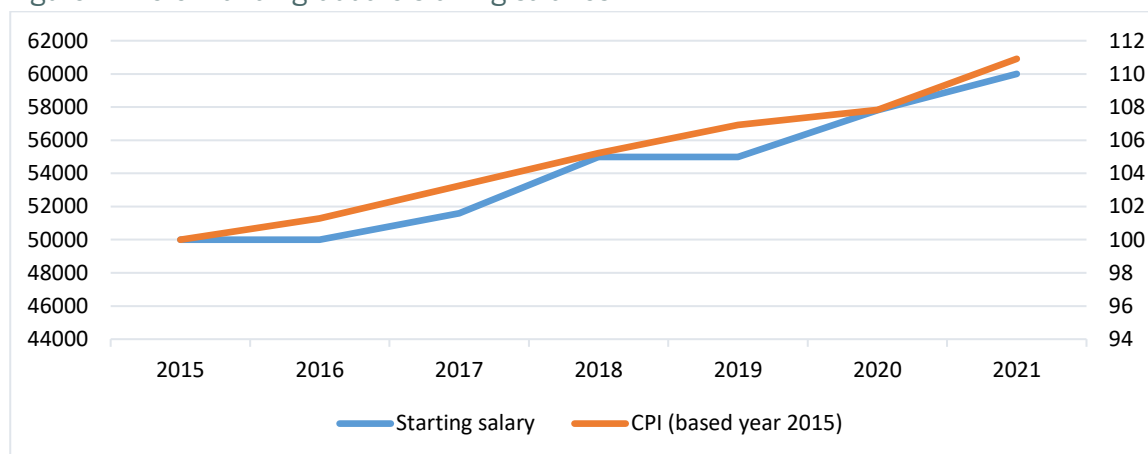
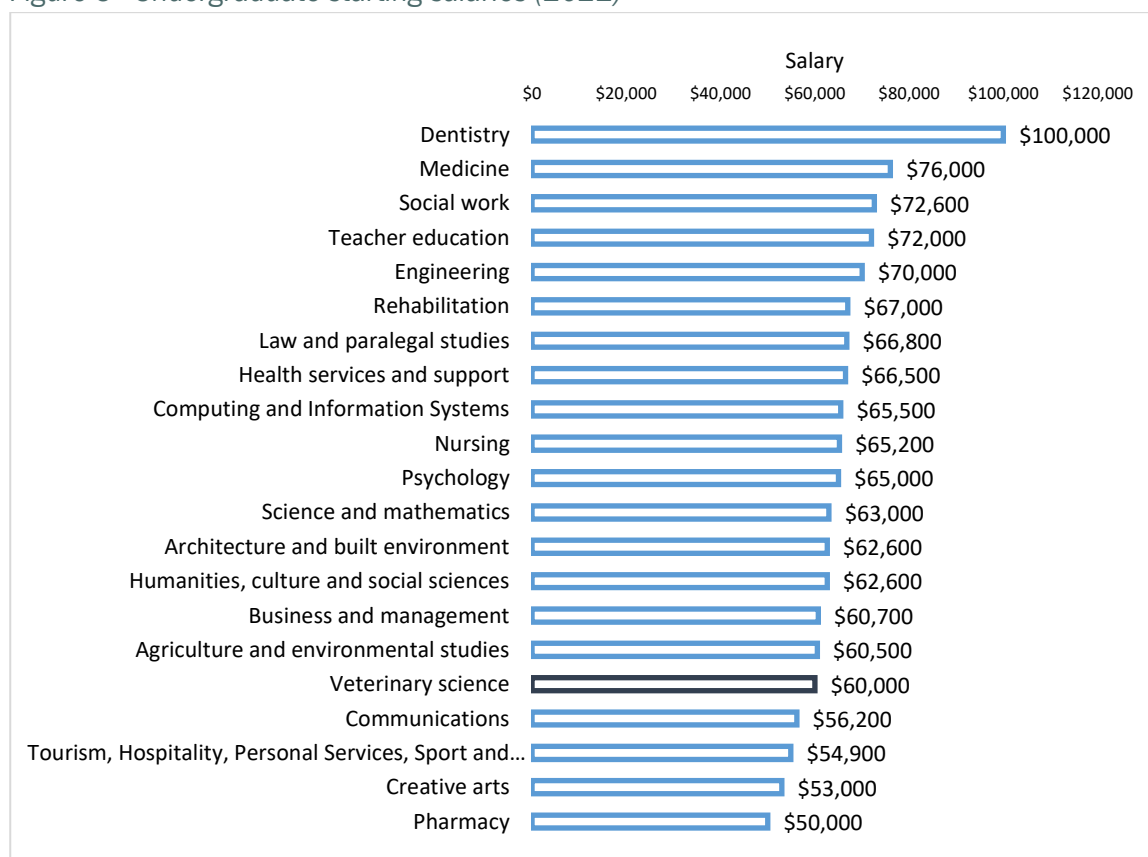


Figure 3 - Undergraduate starting salaries (2021)



<sup>7</sup> [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-\(gos\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-(gos))



## Recommendation 1: Rural Bonding Scheme (\$19.23m over four years)

**1a.** The AVA proposes that the Commonwealth Government introduce a Rural Bonding Scheme (HECS-HELP Forgiveness Scheme) for graduate veterinarians to assist in the shortage of rural veterinarians. This will cost \$19.23 million over four years (\$4.80 million per annum) and would wipe the HECS-HELP debt of 80 new graduates per year, boosting the veterinary workforce in these critically important regions.

This is a relatively modest investment that will assist in relieving the current workforce shortages facing the profession.

The AVA makes the following recommendations around the criteria of the Scheme:

- Participants must be an Australian citizen or permanent resident, registered to practice in Australia;
- Employment must be with a practice that has a majority focus on production animals;
- Employment must be in a Rural or a Remote area (using the [Australian Government's Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification](#) (RRMA));
- Available to all graduates (up to 5 years after graduation);
- Up to 80 placements per year offered: 60 rural and 20 remote;
- Remote participants eligible for a maximum of \$70,000 over a 5-year period;
- Where a HECS-HELP debt exists, payment to be paid directly to HECS-HELP debt; and
- Each year completed attracts the following payment (can be consecutive or non-consecutive):

*Table 3 - Suggested payment eligibility for veterinarians in the first five years post-graduation depending on locality*

Stage	Rural	Remote
Completion of first year	\$9,600	\$12,000
Completion of second year	\$10,400	\$13,000
Completion of third year	\$11,200	\$14,000
Completion of fourth year	\$12,000	\$15,000
Completion of fifth year	\$12,800	\$16,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$56,000</b>	<b>\$70,000</b>

*Table 4 - Impact on budget and forward estimates*

Item	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	Total
Rural placements	\$3.36m	\$3.36m	\$3.36m	\$3.36m	\$13.44m
Remote placement	\$1.40m	\$1.40m	\$1.40m	\$1.40m	\$5.60m
Administration (0.01%)	\$47.6k	\$47.6k	\$47.6k	\$47.6k	\$0.19m
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$4.80m</b>	<b>\$4.80m</b>	<b>\$4.80m</b>	<b>\$4.80m</b>	<b>\$19.23m</b>





The targeted demographic is very supportive of this initiative. One hundred percent of respondents of a survey targeting veterinary students was supportive of this proposal.

*“I think this is a highly anticipated long-awaited proposal that would truly benefit vet graduates. The financial burden of the 6-year HECS fees play a massive role in post graduate employment and life.”*

## **Inclusion of veterinary professionals into rural subsidy schemes**

The AVA is supportive of the National Farmers Federation proposals to encourage more people to choose regional Australia to live, work, and start a family. We would encourage the government to consider including veterinary professionals into any schemes that support Australian families working and living rurally.

## **2. Prioritise veterinary workforce sustainability**

### **Veterinary training and short-term workforce capacity**

There are currently seven Australian universities that offer veterinary science degrees that are recognised by veterinary registration boards. Each year there are approximately 700 students graduating with these qualifications, however each of these programs of study take 5-6 years to complete. This timeframe is required to ensure that the graduates attain the competencies and standards to practice as a veterinarian. However, this timeframe limits the responsiveness of the training system to cater for short-term fluctuations in the demand for veterinarians.

### **Lack of sufficient data and planning**

The long training times for new veterinarians mean that it is crucial that thorough workforce data is collected, analysed, and used for planning future workforce needs to ensure that the supply and demand for veterinarians are matched as closely as possible.

There is currently limited data on the national veterinary workforce. Individual veterinary registration boards collect data to varying degrees in their jurisdiction, however this is inconsistent. The AVA undertakes a biennial survey of veterinarians which reaches across the country however response rates have fluctuated and, in some years, have been very low.



## Recommendation 2: Invest in improved data collection, analysis and workforce planning for the veterinary sector

In order to improve the ongoing sustainability of the veterinary workforce, AVA recommends the Federal Government implement the following recommendations:

- 2a.** *Collect reliable national data on the nature of the veterinary workforce by providing funding to the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council to implement a national data collection system*
- 2b.** *Regularly analyse and forecast future supply and demand of veterinarians.*
- 2c.** *Development of a long-term veterinary workforce plan.*
- 2d.** *Plan for, and fund, veterinary services in areas of public need, including:*
  - o *Animal welfare;*
  - o *Biosecurity*
  - o *Animal population control (e.g. desexing animals);*
  - o *Care of animals owned by the crown (e.g. wildlife);*
  - o *Care of unowned animals (strays); and*
  - o *Emergency care of owned and unowned animals in natural disasters.*

## 3. Formalise the role of veterinarians in biosecurity policy through funding models

Veterinarians play a key role in protecting Australia from diseases that threaten the fabric of the community from both an economic and social point of view. They are vital not only in the prevention of diseases, but also in the early detection through surveillance and early disease diagnosis. If an emergency animal disease response is required, veterinarians have essential roles to play. Funding models should formalise the role of veterinarians in biosecurity policy.

In line with the National Farmers Federation the AVA seeks a strong, well-resourced, efficient, and innovative biosecurity system that protects Australia's agriculture industries, natural environment, community, and economy from the damaging impacts of pests and diseases beyond the current budget period.

The AVA makes the following recommendation regarding biosecurity measures in Australia.

### Recommendation 3:

**3a:** *The Australian Government commit to perpetually funding the biosecurity system through a long-term sustainable, reviewable funding arrangement for biosecurity.*

**3b:** *Increased investment in veterinary services, particularly rural and regional through increased and nationally streamlined funding mechanisms for onshore disease surveillance for private veterinarians*



and increased capacity within government veterinary services. Current levels of investment are risking Australian animal health and welfare, public health, food safety, and maintenance of market access.

**3c: Increasing funding to ensure that veterinary laboratory capacity meets Australia's needs, including those of regional and remote locations.** This includes making sure that funding is in place for all aspects of diagnostic chain, from sample collection from the animal to a standardised reporting system will enable aggregation of data, maximising the reliability, accuracy, useability, and traceability of surveillance data. Furthermore, it includes funding for priority training for laboratory personnel, including veterinary pathologists, microbiologists, and toxicologists. This may include increasing private veterinary laboratory involvement in reference laboratory support to supplement the government laboratory system.

## 4. Veterinary professionals – at greater risk of poor mental health

Even prior to the onset of COVID 19, there were considerable wellness problems across a number of sectors in the veterinary profession. COVID 19 has exacerbated mental health issues within the veterinary profession. The AVA commissioned independent research to investigate mental health amongst the profession. What has been found is that the issue needs to be addressed on multiple fronts, including programs and resources to support the mental health of veterinary professionals.

The Veterinary Wellness Strategy Final Report found:

*...a significant proportion of individuals have experienced a mental health condition, in particular in the last 12 months. Over half (66.6%) of respondents said they have or are experiencing a mental health condition... SuperFriend's multi-year research shows the prevalence of self-reported mental ill-health has increased during the recent years of the global pandemic, the veterinary profession sits 4.8% above other industries.<sup>8</sup>*

More specifically, 41.6% of respondents to the survey indicated that they had experienced a mental health condition in the past 12 months: This is more prevalent in the younger age categories, with 63% of respondents between 25-29 indicating they had experienced a mental health condition in the past 12 months. These younger cohorts represent the sections of the veterinary workforce suffering from the greatest attrition.

The AVA has identified a range of areas in which the federal government could assist:

- **Mental health training and support for veterinarians** - Government support for dedicated mental health training and support for veterinarians that includes:
  - Whole of career mentoring (from undergraduate veterinarians to veterinarians approaching retirement and beyond).
  - Dedicated veterinary counselling services.

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<sup>8</sup> Superfriend, *Australian Veterinary Association Veterinary Wellness Strategy – Final Report*, 2021.



- Funding for veterinarians, nurses, and practice managers to complete mental health literacy training including educational programs to improve workplace culture.

## Recommendation 4

**4a:** Sectoral support of the veterinary profession (\$3 million over four years) to establish a national veterinary profession led approach to improve veterinarian wellbeing and improve career satisfaction and sustainability via veterinary-focused mental health education campaigns, whole career mentoring/support and an accessible 24/7 veterinary friendly counselling service.