

Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW



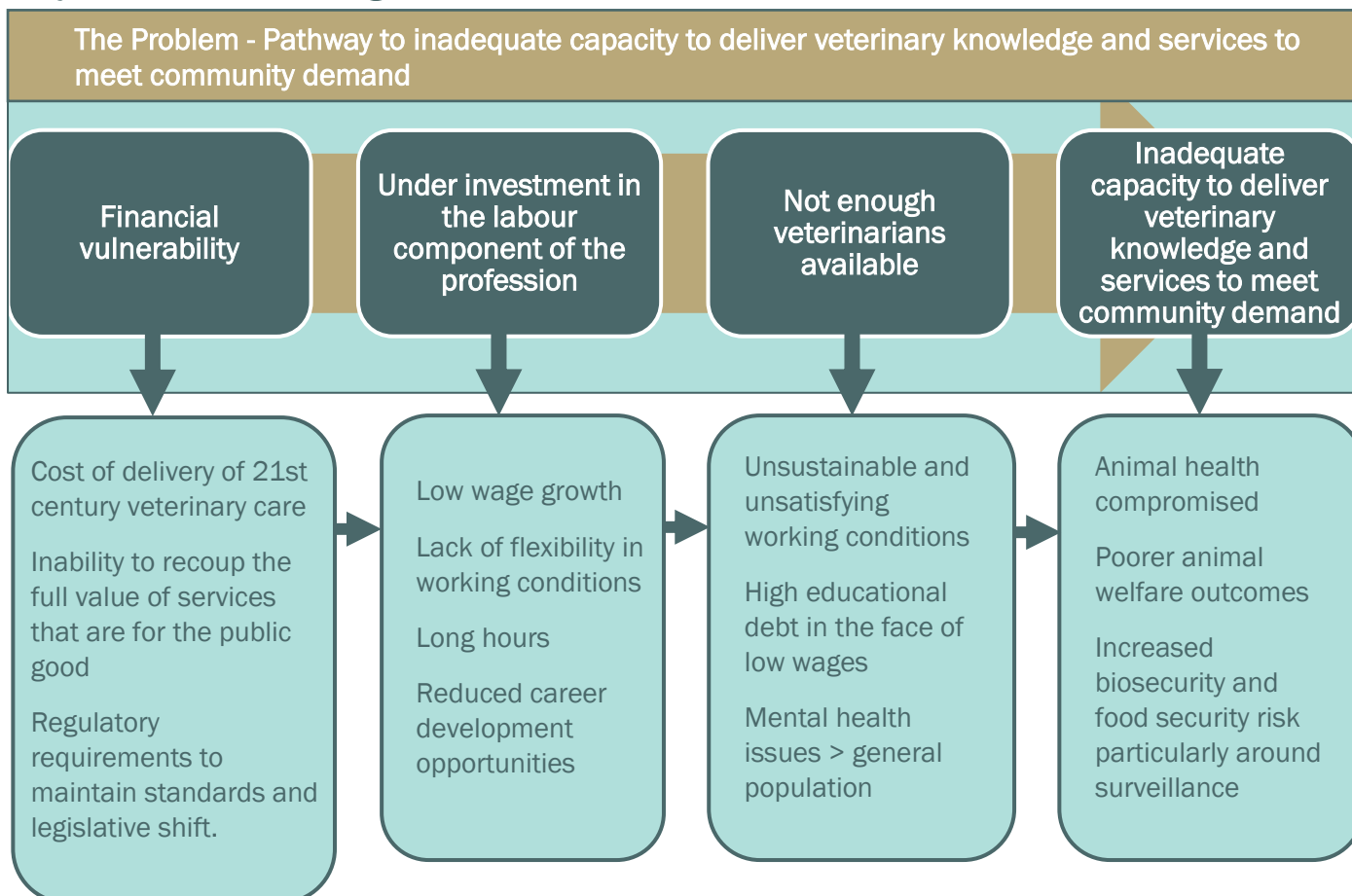
The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the peak national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Thirty percent of the AVA's membership reside and work in NSW and come from all fields within the veterinary profession.

At the AVA, we strongly believe in the power of collective action through a united voice, complimented by individual voices. We encourage you to consider [submitting your own individual feedback and recommendations directly to the inquiry](#) by the 21st of July. To help you develop your individual submission, this document provides some key messages you may consider incorporating into your submission as you see fit. Including: **Summary of the veterinary profession, Why there's not enough veterinarians available, Proposed solutions, AVA recommendations to the inquiry, and AVA key messages addressing the inquiry's terms of reference**

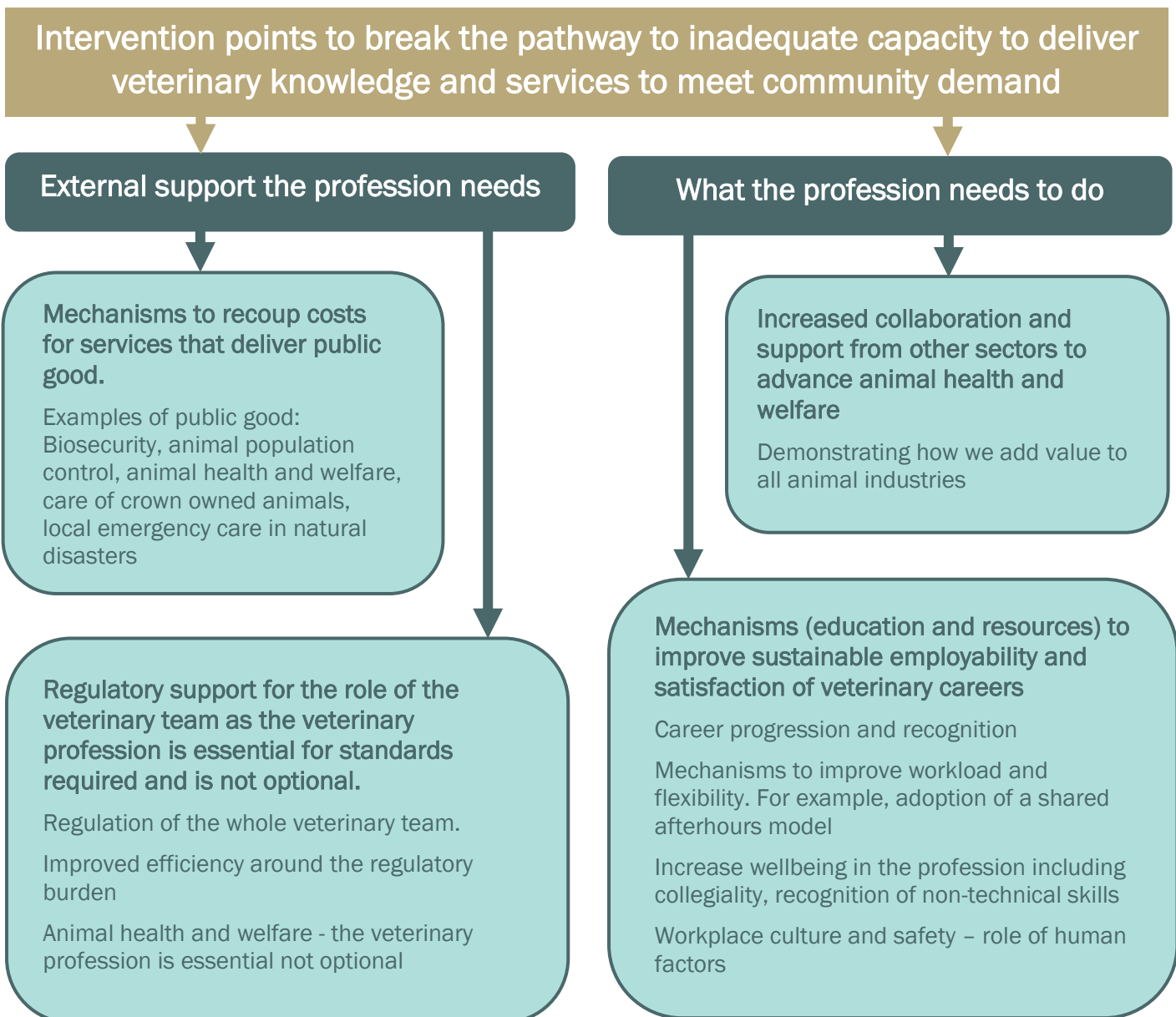
Veterinary Profession Summary

- In Australia there are 15,000 registered veterinarians to look after 30.4 million pets, this does not include livestock or wildlife. To provide a comparison there are about 130,000 doctors to look after 26.5 million people.
- In NSW there are 4,396 registered veterinarians. 61% are within metro area. 31% in Inner Regional Australia, 8% rural and remote. 30% of Australia's veterinary practices are within NSW, which is around 1,000 private veterinary businesses.
- The veterinary shortage is being felt across the whole profession in NSW and nationally across every sector, including clinical (small, mixed and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry, and pathology. For the last 7 years it has been formally recognised by the National Skills Commission Skills Priority List that the whole veterinary sector has workforce shortages.
- In 2021 in NSW 40.51% (compared to a national rate of 38.65%) of veterinary job vacancies took more than 12 months to fill. When separating out rural practices 46% were not filled after 12 months

Why are there not enough veterinarians available?



The Solutions



The solutions required to address this issue are complex and multifactorial and will need to be considered in the context of long-term outcomes and unintended consequences.

The AVA believes we need some interventions with short term outcomes to provide breathing space while the longer-term outcomes are addressed. The short-term policy projects that would be of assistance now are:

- Educational fee relief to increase the number of early career veterinarians into rural areas.
- Improvements in the migration pathway to assist veterinarians and veterinary nurses to enter the country and get PR would also be useful.
- Inclusion of registered veterinarians within other current mechanisms to sustain medical and paramedical workers in rural areas, under the accepted OneHealth model approach for health in Australia.

Further data and resourced creative strategic thinking are required to progress the longer-term solutions that will provide the greatest impact.

With collaboration and careful thinking this problem can be solved. We are hopeful that outcomes of this inquiry will allow strategies and solutions to be developed and actioned in NSW, that will not only make NSW a sought-after destination to attract and retain veterinarians, and appropriately sustain veterinary practices, but also as a pilot for how this issue could be addressed at a national level.

AVA Recommendations to the Inquiry

To achieve long term outcomes

The AVA is calling upon the NSW Government to:

- provide funding to resource the development of prioritisation and planning of the longer-term strategies that will have the most effective outcomes for all stakeholders the veterinary profession serves and the profession itself.
- conduct legislative and regulatory reforms to safeguard the role of the veterinary profession in the delivery of animal health and welfare, whilst making it adaptable to a constantly changing environment.
- through funding encourage animal related industries and the veterinary profession to collaborate and develop a framework/solution that will improve integration of veterinary services into animal production systems that is workable for all parties.
- explore solutions that support the veterinary sector in its role with stray animals, addressing the key issues outlined and promoting overall animal health, welfare, and public health.
- commits funding to develop and implement a framework that provides regulatory and appropriate financial support to the provision of veterinary services for lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations provided by all sectors of the profession (charities and the private veterinary sector).
- 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.

Short term strategies to allow time for development and implementation of long-term strategies

The AVA is calling upon the NSW Government to:

- commit to ongoing recognition and support of veterinarians to continue to build and maintain capacity for EAD surveillance and response activities.
- consider funding for the profession to provide Work Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities for individuals wishing to work in NSW as well as funding to assist NSW applicants undertake the examination process without financial hardship.
- considers funding around educational fee relief to encourage early career veterinarians to work in rural NSW.
- include veterinarians in existing mechanisms to sustain medical and paramedical workers in rural areas of NSW.
- commit funding to AVA's wellness initiative, THRIVE to support veterinarians and veterinary staff to lead satisfying, prosperous and healthy careers.
- consider funding a public awareness campaign to address the rising rates of verbal and physical assault of veterinary teams and to educate the community on the impact of their actions. For example, similar to the [NSW Ambulance 'Its Never Okay'](#) campaign.

AVA Key Messages Addressing the Inquiry Terms of Reference

Below provides some key messages extracted from the AVA's comprehensive submission to the inquiry that's currently in the process of being finalised.

a) the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry, and pathology

Although the veterinary workforce shortage has been present for many years it has been limited to certain sectors (livestock veterinarians, pathologists, and government vets). The shortage has now expanded into all sectors of the profession and for the last 7 years it has been formally recognised by the government. The drivers of inadequate capacity vary between differing sectors of the profession. In some instances, inadequate capacity may be due to long term decline in demand as is seen in livestock veterinary services. On the other hand, inadequate capacity in the companion animal sector (where there is a connection with an individual animal (emotional or high value) e.g., small animals, horses, peri-urban very small holding) is being driven by a rapid increase in demand due to increase in animal ownership and requirement for veterinary services. Due to the changing landscape of veterinary care, characterised by the increasing complexity of care, higher community expectations, and a lower tolerance for risk, there has been a decline in the quantity of veterinary services available to the community.

In its entirety the profession is growing in size and growth exceeds that of the general population. The changing work participation rates and hours worked reflect that of the general workforce. There are several sectors within the profession where the growth is limited, stagnant or in fact there is a contraction. These include veterinarians in the following sectors; large animal (livestock and horse), government, academia, industry/research, and veterinary pathology.

b) the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates

There are an ever-increasing number of challenges that are faced by the veterinary profession to maintain a sustainable veterinary workforce, and these can be broadly categorised into those;

1. driven by the private sector veterinary profession's financial vulnerability,
2. due to generational and societal change, and
3. due to limited funding for the public veterinary sector.

Financial Vulnerability - This is caused by a myriad of factors. As almost all of the veterinary sector is within the private market it is a major driver of the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary work force. Financial vulnerability is occurring due to the desire of the profession to make veterinary services available to as much as the community as possible and our regulatory obligations.

Generational and societal change – The veterinary model has not been able to adapt particularly well to the significant generational and societal change that has occurred this century and late last century. This is not unique to the veterinary profession, however, is a significant contributor to the challenges in workforce sustainability.

Limited funding for the public veterinary sector – All of the same challenges seen in the private veterinary sector are present within publicly funded veterinary sector due to limited funding and de-prioritisation by government over time.

The result of these challenges is difficulty in recruitment and retention. In 2021 in NSW 40.51% (compared to a national rate of 38.65%) of veterinary job vacancies took more than 12 months to fill. When separating out rural practices, 46% were not filled after 12 months. In addition, up to 13% of the workforce was considering leaving a veterinary role within the next 12 months.

c) the burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession

The burn out 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 social change. Many of the issues that the veterinary profession face are common to a large number of the service professions.

Burn out has been well recognised in the profession for some time and the cost to profession is estimated to be 2.01% of its value due to poor retention and reduced working hours. 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. It 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. Poor interactions with the community, and inappropriate use of social media have a significant role to play.

The worst-case scenario for those with mental health challenges is death by suicide. The limited evidence suggests risk of death by suicide is increased in the veterinary profession compared to the general population. The profession as a whole is working hard in this area and the sole focus of protection has now moved to also encapsulate prevention and promotion of good workplace practices to improve these issues.

d) the role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses

It is likely there will be many synergies between the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia submission to the inquiry and the AVA's thoughts.

e) the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians

Some veterinary degrees obtained in other countries are considered equivalent to an Australian veterinary degree allowing for those individuals to work as veterinarians. There are a number of degrees that do not demonstrate equivalency and individuals that hold those degrees must undergo individual examination (Australasian veterinary examination (AVE) process) to demonstrate competency.

Migration has a role in helping address the shortage with immediate effect, allowing longer term solutions time to mature. In areas of high need the regulatory body has some flexibility to provide limited registration if risk to the community can be managed. Examples of this include specialist trained veterinarians without a primary equivalent veterinary degree or veterinarians registering for specific roles (e.g., abattoir vets).

There are a number of challenges faced by overseas veterinarians with equivalent degrees due to the visa requirements and permanent residency restriction. Although there is a clear pathway for individuals without equivalent degrees to be able to work as a veterinarian in Australia, it takes a significant time and financial investment to complete this process.

f) the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services

The methods the profession has of managing after-hours veterinary services varies depending on the species and geography. In the case of urban companion animal practice, it is common practice to have large emergency centres that service the community outside business hours, rather than individual practices. Emergency centres tend to operate on a shift basis model to provide their service. Generally, in large animal practice and in rural areas veterinary practices provide an "on call" service for management of ongoing care of animals and emergency animal care. This is usually managed by the same team that work during the day and is an additional workload for veterinarians.

The requirement to provide an afterhours service has a negative impact on working conditions and level of satisfaction for many veterinarians. After hours has also been raised as a factor that contributes to poor mental health, particularly the requirement to be available 24/7 with no ability to rest and protect wellbeing. It is also a factor that negatively impacts recruitment and retention.

The accepted model for managing the provision of afterhours has not been sustainable for veterinary teams and a mechanism veterinary practices are using to manage this is to reduce the provision of afterhours veterinary service. This has resulted in overall reduction in veterinary services available to the community outside business hours which negatively impacts animal and human welfare.

g) the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians

It is in the interests of the community that the provision of veterinary services is regulated. Regulation of the veterinary sector is a partnership between government and the veterinary profession. The profession itself has a strong interest in ensuring that appropriate standards of care are maintained. This is crucial to the maintenance of public confidence in the profession. Veterinarians are consistently ranked amongst the most trusted occupations.

If regulation is too dated or too restrictive, it will impede innovation and restrict the ability of the profession to adapt to modern environments. Regular review and development of the legislation is needed to support modern veterinary practice. Too little attention to regulation leads to poor animal health and welfare outcomes. Veterinarians, as experts in their field, and governed by a strong professional and ethical code, provide an important element in this. Their expertise and judgment underpin the community obligation to the health and welfare of animals. Their involvement also provides a safety net where regulation may not be precise enough.

Regulation currently only extends to veterinarians

The existing regulatory framework in NSW only regulates veterinarians rather than other members of the veterinary team. This is limiting the capacity of the workforce and efficacy of the veterinary team. We would like to see a regulated veterinarian led team. Registration of veterinary nurses and para-veterinary staff by the

Veterinary Practitioners Board, legislated through the VPA would allow the setting of professional standards for this group.

Breaches of restricted acts of veterinary sciences

The legislation includes a set of 'restricted acts of veterinary science'. This details those procedures that only veterinarians (or regulated veterinary paraprofessionals) are able to perform. The mechanisms to enforce consequences for breaches of restricted acts of veterinary science by non-regulated providers are limited and ineffective.

Complaints process

The complaints processes and the policies and procedures that sit under this needs to be updated to meet contemporary practice. Existing complaints and disciplinary process as well and the increased litigious nature of the community makes veterinarians very risk adverse and adds to the administrative burden of regulation. This can be detrimental to the animal owning public and increased the administrative burden on veterinarians.

Another issue with complaints is that individual veterinarians who may be the subject of a complaint are not always in a position to be able to correct an issue, nor necessarily the cause, when they relate to systemic issues or procedures within the practice. Current complaint processes are focused on the individual veterinarian and don't have a mechanism for addressing systemic issues.

Unfunded obligations

There are a number of Acts that place obligations on to the veterinary profession with no method for the profession to recoup the costs of meeting the obligation. Examples can be found within the NSW Companion Animal Act and NSW Veterinary Practice Act.

h) the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

As a generality there has been a decreased demand for the provision of livestock veterinary services compared to companion animal veterinary services. Despite the desire of the profession to shift to providing advice in the area of preventive medicine and optimising production animal health, producers predominant demand for veterinarians continues to be availability of reactive services for individual animals. With increased self-efficacy of animal producers and varying individual animal value, these services remain in decline despite the increase in number of animals within the animal agricultural sector.

The erosion of skill set in livestock veterinary services, has reached the point that there is now not sufficient capacity within the profession to meet the low demand required by livestock producers. This is reflected in the low percentage of the veterinary workforce providing livestock veterinary services and the aging demographic of that workforce. This could be considered a classic example of a "use it or lose it" scenario. The unintended consequence of industry optionally engaging with the veterinary profession, after a history of it being delivered as a funded public good, has meant that even aspects of veterinary service that producers require are no longer available.

This is very problematic as private veterinarians are an integral contributor to an effective animal disease surveillance system and are at the forefront for the detection of disease. Their absence places Australia's biosecurity system at risk.

Rural veterinary practices are highly reliant on companion animal practice to maintain viability. The rural companion animal veterinary service provision model is not as attractive to veterinarians and veterinary team members as the urban companion animal veterinary service model, this combined with additional factors such as reduced access to vital community and support services (e.g. child care) has led to an overall reduction of rural veterinary businesses.

i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations

The management of homeless animals, treatment of injured and ill animals (large and small) with no known ownership is expected when affected animals are presented to a veterinary practice, but as these animals are either owned by the crown, are unowned or displaced, the cost of care provided by the veterinary practice is generally unable to be recouped. The profession undertakes a number of roles in providing care to this group of animals and they usually require infrastructure and equipment to deliver.

Despite the collection of animal management fees for decades by local government, much of the cost of animal management of lost, stray, and homeless animals has been shifted onto the private veterinary sector, with some supplementation through provision of service from government funded charities. There is a lack of consistency between local councils of how they engage with veterinary practices to manage strays and provide expertise around animal management in times of crisis, which has resulted in unnecessary animal death.

j) the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others

The current inadequate capacity of the veterinary workforce is negatively impacting on all aspects of animal welfare and places animal related industries at risk in terms of both biosecurity and social licence. The acceptance and approval by the community of animal industries to operate is contingent on the premise that animal health and welfare is maintained to appropriate standards. Veterinarians are critical in ensuring these standards are maintained and improved on as new evidence comes to light through research. Often animal related industries infer that veterinarians are an essential component of how their animals are managed which helps maintain social licence, yet the inclusion of veterinary services is optional. This is a factor that has contributed to the current inadequate capacity of the veterinary workforce.

The optional model of veterinary engagement in some animal production systems means risk mitigation techniques around EAD such as surveillance are no longer occurring at an appropriate level and putting animal welfare at risk.

From the perspective of the individual animal at the very best, the inadequate capacity to provide veterinary knowledge and services to meet demand results in a delay in care, at worst it results in no care and in some cases leads to prolonged suffering or an inhumane death.

k) current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations

Access to veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural, and remote locations, can be hindered by several barriers.

- Affordability in light of the costs of delivery and business model. - This particularly impacts those with lower incomes. Given the lack of public funding, the full cost of care needs to pass on to the animal owner. The profession's desire to manage affordability for animal owners and deliver public good has resulted in underinvestment in the labour component contributing to the shortage. Mechanisms to try and address this affordability is currently in the form of pet insurances and afterpay schemes. They have assisted to some degree in the mid to higher socioeconomic community groups but are not adequate for lower socioeconomic groups as they are expensive or can increase debt exponentially.
- Inability of the profession to service people experiencing vulnerabilities - In the human health sector there are allied industries that provide mechanisms for people to access human health care. In the veterinary profession such mechanisms are extremely limited.
- Distance to travel - This has become increasingly problematic in rural areas for both large and small animals particularly when veterinary services have been discontinued.
- Stigma or Fear of Judgment

l) strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practicing veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales

The veterinary workforce is a complex system where there are many factors interplaying with each other, in some cases synergistically while at other times antagonistically. The veterinary workforce shortage has been decades in the making and while the AVA is of the opinion that there are some short-term stop gap strategies that can be put into place to assist, longer term strategies are required for sustained improvement.

The long-term strategies to address the underlying causes and modify the structure of the profession to adapt to the changing needs of society are going to require careful thinking and further data collection is required to produce strategies where the outcomes do not have unintended consequences and are not to the detriment of animal welfare, the community or the profession.

The AVA is of the opinion there are intervention points to break the pathway to inadequate capacity to deliver veterinary knowledge and services to meet demand. Some of these are within the remit of the profession to develop and apply, while others require external support from those who benefit from the veterinary profession, that is the wider veterinary industry, animal related industries, and the community through the government.

Long term strategies must address the long-term outcomes the profession needs to achieve. These outcomes include

- Sustainability of the profession by reducing financial vulnerability.
- Regulatory support for the role of the veterinary team as the veterinary profession is essential for standards required and is not optional.

- A workforce that is able to rapidly adapt to generational and societal change around workforce participation and surge at times of increased demand.
- A vibrant rural veterinary community where the veterinary roles are sustainable and satisfying, all animals in those communities (livestock and companion animals) have access to veterinary care, and veterinary involvement in animal production systems is mandated as essential to enhance animal welfare and biosecurity.

Short term strategies are also required to act as a stop gap to allow resources to be directed to developing the longer-term solutions. The AVA believes there a number of shorter-term strategies that would be of benefit, including

- Educational fee relief to increase the number of early career veterinarians into rural areas.
- Reduction of barriers to assist veterinarians and veterinary nurses to enter the country and achieve permanent residence
- Inclusion of registered veterinarians within other current mechanisms to sustain medical and paramedical workers in rural areas, under the accepted OneHealth model approach for health in Australia.
- Increase exposure of veterinary students to rural veterinary practice by providing support for veterinary students wanting to participate in work integrated learning (WIL) placements rurally and remotely.

m) strategies to improve access to veterinary care

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.

The key to improving access to veterinary care to the whole community is to support the existing structure that is in place and ensuring there is synergy and symbiosis with the public and private veterinary sector. Given that the structure of the profession has evolved to a predominantly privately funded system, strategies must involve supporting the existing private veterinary sector system that is in place, rather than eroding it, as this will have unintended consequences because this market has developed extensive infrastructure and capacity to supply services.

To improve access to veterinary care the AVA would like to see

- Increasing affordability and accessibility through fostering partnerships between the private veterinary sector, animal welfare organisations, and community groups to enhance service provision in underserved areas or to clients experiencing vulnerability, such as low income.
- Collaboration of the profession with animal industries and government to develop long term strategies to improve access of veterinary care to maximise animal welfare and improve biosecurity.
- Expansion of the regulatory framework of the veterinary profession to include veterinary nurses, veterinary technicians and potentially paraprofessionals. These professionals would need to operate under the licensure and supervision of a qualified veterinarian to ensure monitoring, accountability, and maintenance of required and regulated standards.
- Collaboration with other sectors to allow improved access to people experiencing vulnerabilities