



Australian Veterinary Association

Investing in Vets

2022 State Election Platform



## AVA 2022 South Australia State Election Platform

### About the Australian Veterinary Association

The AVA is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 8,500 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

### A profession in crisis

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 is suffering from marked underinvestment, predominantly around labour investment, 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 veterinary service provision, which is now well evidenced. 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 a veterinary workforce shortage through high levels of attrition and severe mental health issues and risks the continuance and quality of Australian animal health. Low rates of remuneration compared to other professions such as medicine, engineering, dentistry, significant educational debt, continued costs to remain registered and competent, and difficult working conditions combine to make the industry an unattractive one financially to remain in long-term. There are 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: our biosecurity, economy, and way of life.

The AVA urges the incoming government to commit to:

- Mental health support for veterinary professionals
- Assistance in addressing workforce shortages
- Progressing amendments to the *Veterinary Practice Act*

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

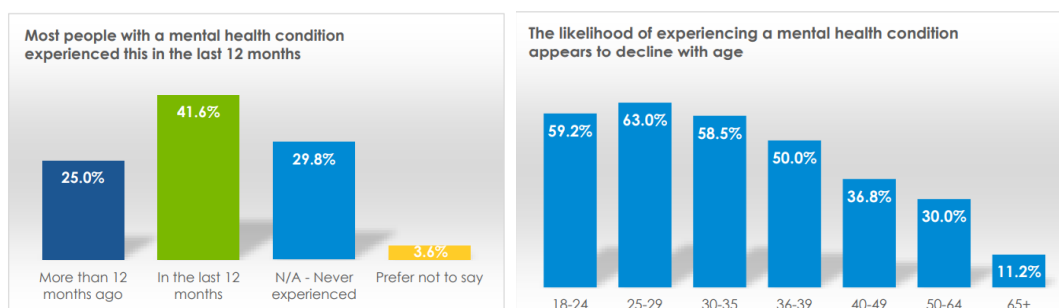
Even prior to the onset of COVID 19, there were considerable wellness problems across a number of sectors in the veterinary profession. Research shows that the profession experiences suicide rates of four times those of the general population. COVID 19 has exacerbated mental health issues within the profession. AVA has commissioned independent research by workplace mental health consultants, Superfriend, to investigate mental health amongst the profession. What has been found is that the issue needs to be addressed on multiple fronts, including financial stress, working conditions, and client relations.

The Superfriend 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. In comparison, SuperFriend's Indicators of a Thriving Workplace national survey (2021) which is an annual workplace survey, that draws from a representative sample of over 10,000 workers across industries, found that 61.8% of Australia's working population has, 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>1</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 governments could assist:

- *Public education campaign* - to educate the community on the important role veterinarians perform in the community every day and the importance of treating veterinarians with respect and courtesy.
- *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
  - Funding for veterinarians, nurses and practice managers to complete mental health literacy training

## Recommendation

- That the South Australian Government work with the AVA in funding a public education campaign in support of veterinary professionals.
- That the South Australian Government work with the AVA in funding a dedicated mental health program for veterinarians.

<sup>1</sup> Superfriend, *Australian Veterinary Association Veterinary Wellness Strategy – Final Report, 2021*.



## Workforce sustainability

Without veterinarians in rural and regional areas risks emerge in Australia's food production and add to biosecurity risks. Veterinary education is expensive to deliver and student experiences particularly in the rural and regional sectors come at an increasing cost to both veterinary students and the veterinary profession. This results in fewer graduates in rural and regional areas. Given the importance of the veterinary profession to society and the role the profession plays in biosecurity, food security, human health and well-being, it is critical that veterinary positions in rural and regional Australia can be filled. Further analysis into the education and training of veterinary professionals to address labour market shortages – specifically in regional and rural areas and amongst early career vets is required. In the interim funding to assist students to increase their exposure to areas of the profession that are suffering the greatest labour shortages, e.g farm animal veterinarians, public health, pathology is likely to result in positive outcomes.

## Recommendation

- That the South Australian government commit funding for further analysis of the veterinary workforce needs of rural and regional areas along with the state generally, and works with the AVA on identifying and supporting solutions to the current workforce shortage.

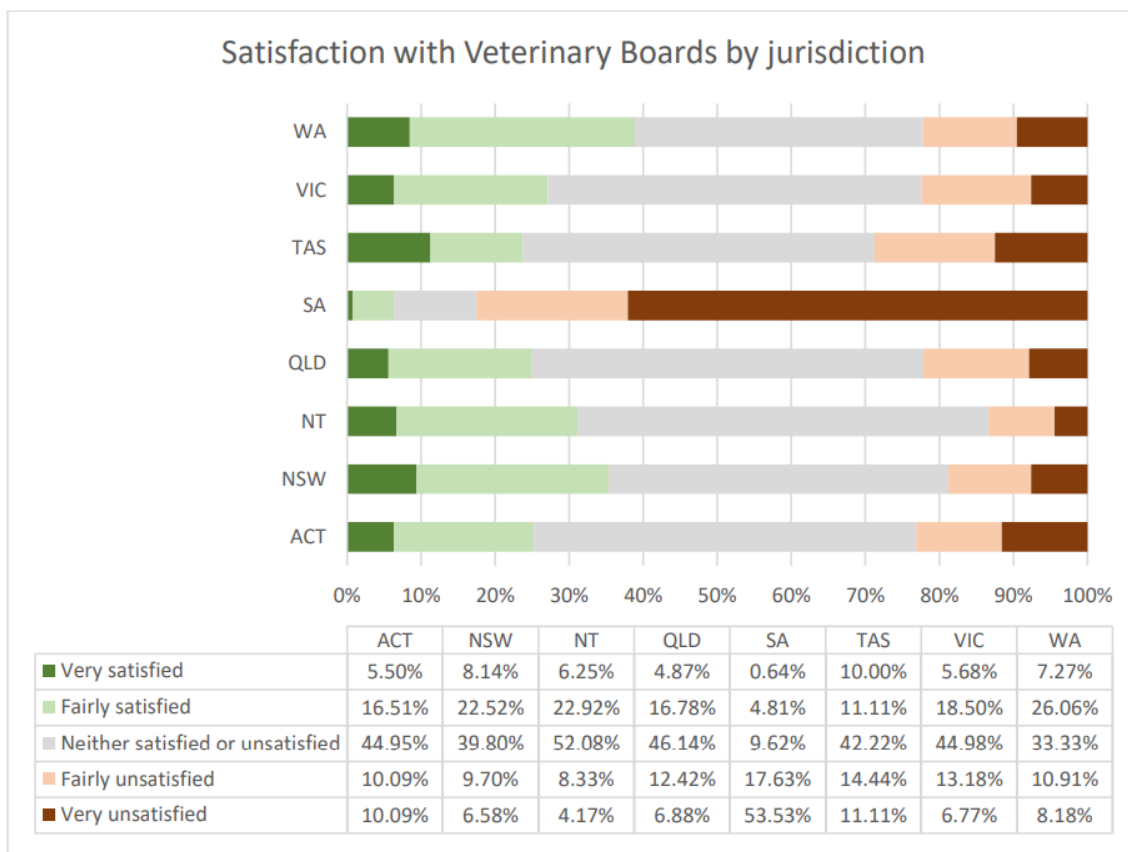
## Amendments to the *Veterinary Practice Act*

It is in the interests of all veterinarians and the community that the profession be regulated. It ensures that the public can have confidence when they visit registered veterinarians with their animals. The AVA, as the professional association for veterinarians, has a strong commitment to the delivery of quality veterinary care. We demonstrate this commitment on a daily basis with our Continuing Professional Development programs, accreditation programs, and our mentoring.

The veterinary profession in South Australia has a strong record of service in safeguarding animal health and welfare, as well as providing exemplary service to animal owners and the community broadly. The veterinary boards have an important oversight role but the high level of integrity of our veterinarians must also be acknowledged.

As a group of dedicated professionals, veterinarians have a keen interest in, and strongly support, a properly regulated professional environment. As a principle however, we believe that the profession can and should self-regulate within a legislative framework. Consistent with this principle, the AVA recommends that the majority of the members of any regulatory body should be veterinarians and that the chair of veterinary boards should also be a veterinarian. This is to ensure that there is national consistency, a clear understanding of the nature of veterinary practice, and that they can be effective in their leadership within the profession.

There is significant concern amongst the veterinary profession about the operations of the Board. A nation-wide survey in early 2021 found that the regulation of the profession in South Australia stood out starkly:



While some level of dissatisfaction with veterinary boards is to be expected, these results show that the South Australian Board is significantly out of step with the broader veterinary profession.

South Australia is the only Australian state where the presiding member of the veterinary board is required to be a legal practitioner. In every other state this role is undertaken by a veterinarian. Veterinary boards operate effectively in each of these jurisdictions, and they take their governance role seriously, thus any assertion that the role needs the specific expertise of a legal practitioner is erroneous. The AVA acknowledges the value in having a Board member with legal expertise, however this role should not be the Chair. Health Boards in Australia nationally, have one of their registered practitioners as their President/Chair, for instance the Dental Board of Australia, The Medical Board of Australia, and the SA Board of the Medical Board of Australia.

### Recommendation

- That the South Australian Government progress the development of amendments to the *Veterinary Practice Act* that include retaining a veterinary board with majority veterinarian membership and a chair who is a veterinarian.

For further information please contact:

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