



The veterinary sector –
An essential part of a healthy Australia
2024-2025 Pre-Budget submission
to the
Government of the Australian Capital Territory

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
February 2024

Acknowledgment of Country

The Australian Veterinary Association acknowledges the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region. 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.

Special Interest Groups

- AUSTRALIAN SMALL ANIMAL VETERINARIANS
- AUSTRALIAN CATTLE VETERINARIANS
- EQUINE VETERINARIANS AUSTRALIA
- VETERINARY BUSINESS GROUP
- AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY ACUPUNCTURE GROUP
- AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY BEHAVIOURAL MEDICINE
- COMMERCIAL POULTRY VETERINARIANS
- AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY CONSERVATION BIOLOGY
- AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY DENTAL SOCIETY
- VETERINARIANS IN EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND ACADEMIA
- AUSTRALIAN GREYHOUND WORKING AND SPORTING DOG VETERINARIANS
- AUSTRALIAN VETERINARIANS IN INDUSTRY
- INTEGRATIVE VETERINARIANS AUSTRALIA
- AUSTRALIAN PIG VETERINARIANS
- AUSTRALIAN VETERINARIANS IN PUBLIC HEALTH
- AUSTRALIAN REPRODUCTIVE VETERINARIANS
- SHEEP, CAMELID AND GOAT VETERINARIANS
- AUSTRALIAN VETERINARIANS FOR ANIMAL WELFARE AND ETHICS
- UNUSUAL PET AND AVIAN VETERINARIANS

State and Territory Divisions

- Western Australia
- Northern Territory
- South Australia
- New South Wales
- Queensland
- Victoria
- Tasmania
- Australian Capital Territory

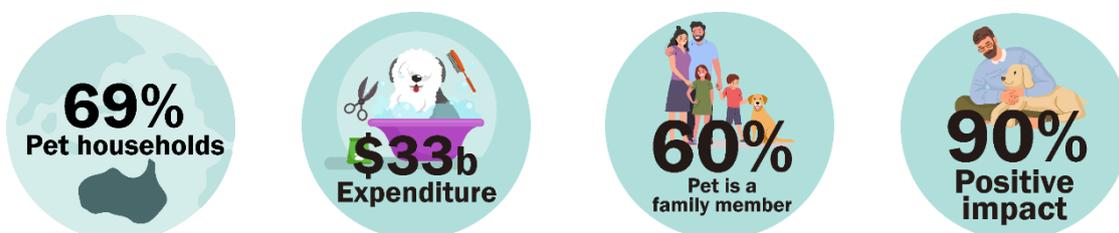


State of the veterinary sector

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 they 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.

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 half a billion in the ACT.²

The livestock industry in the ACT is worth \$12 million annually³. 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.

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>



Summary of recommendations

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

Recommendation 1.1 Funding for the AVA wellness initiative (THRIVE)

The ACT Government commit to funding (\$150,000 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 Student placement support

The ACT Government subsidies for accommodation and travel costs associated with students undertaking clinical placements in the ACT. Because there is no university that has a veterinary school in the ACT, no veterinary students are based here, and the cost of travel and accommodation for students seeking placements in ACT veterinary facilities can be prohibitive. Students are an important source of future staff.

Recommendation 2.2 Recent Graduate Rural and Regional incentive funding

The ACT Government implement an incentive scheme that provides a financial payment to recent graduates who begin their veterinary careers in the ACT region. 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 had completed at least five years veterinary practice in the ACT.

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

Recommendation 3.1 - Biosecurity funding

In its funding of the biosecurity system the ACT Government commit to including increased specific investment in veterinary services (particularly rural and regional) and supporting delivery of those veterinary services that deliver public good.

Recommendation 3.2 - Animal care during emergency disaster situations

The ACT Government establish a disaster response and recovery fund to support the provision of veterinary care to animals impacted in natural disasters.

Recommendation 3.3 - Veterinary services for wildlife

The ACT 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.



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 ACT Government support the extension of a suite of AVA veterinary specific mental health support programs.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

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 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.

Burn out 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.
- 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.

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>



- 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:

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

To assist in addressing this, we propose that the ACT Government support the extension of a suite of AVA veterinary specific mental health support programs, including:

- Cultivating Safe Teams – Psychological health and safety awareness training sessions for all individuals working in the veterinary profession.
- Mental health first aid for veterinary teams

Recommendation 1.1 Funding for the AVA wellness initiative (THRIVE)

The ACT Government commit to funding (\$150,000 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.

Workforce shortages are currently affecting the veterinary industry. This is particularly so in the ACT region 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 Canberra and the surrounding region don't have access to adequate veterinary services it makes it harder for all employers to attract and maintain a workforce.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Australia, including in the ACT⁹ is 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
- Increased risk to human health and well-being

Across all localities (urban and rural) there has been a significant increase in demand for veterinary services by 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).

Veterinarians are more likely to be attracted to the ACT region if there are flexible working conditions, minimal afterhours requirements, higher remuneration, improved lifestyle and access to services, or a government financial subsidy (such as educational fee relief).¹⁰

To support the long-term viability of ACT veterinary practices, the Government needs to provide proactive initiatives to attract and retain veterinarians and support veterinary practices.

Veterinary student placements in the ACT

During their education, veterinary students participate in various clinical placements, but these activities receive no financial support from the university. Consequently, students are responsible for covering their own travel and accommodation expenses for these placements. This economic burden restricts the frequency of student placements in the ACT region. Without sufficient exposure to the advantages of ACT veterinary practice, students may not view it as a desirable career location after graduation.

ACT government subsidies for accommodation and travel costs associated with students undertaking clinical placements in the ACT area will increase the number of students that are properly exposed to veterinary practice in the region and will increase the likelihood that they will see the ACT as attractive options upon graduation.

Incentives for recent graduates to practice in the ACT

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. When surveyed, financial drivers impact on veterinary student decision making about careers post-graduation.

⁹ ACT Critical Skills List April 2023, <https://www.act.gov.au/migration/skilled-migrants/act-critical-skills-list>

¹⁰ Australian Veterinary Association. Veterinary Workforce Survey. 2021. Available from: <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>



The AVA proposes that the ACT Government implement an incentive scheme that provides a financial payment to recent graduates who begin their veterinary careers in Canberra region. 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 had completed at least five years veterinary practice in the ACT area. This is to encourage the veterinarians to stay in the ACT long enough to ‘put down some roots’.

Recommendation 2.1 Student placement support

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3 - Sustainability of veterinary services – recouping the costs of delivery 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 ACT Government commit to funding delivery of private veterinary services that are for the public good, particularly in the areas of biosecurity, animal care during emergency disaster situations and veterinary services for wildlife.

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;
- Accessibility of veterinary services for emergencies 24/7;
- Biosecurity obligations such as passive surveillance, diagnostic and reporting obligations;
- Discounted desexing to assist with animal population control;
- Treatment of unowned wildlife; and
- Treatment of animals in 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. 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.



Biosecurity

The Australian *Red Meat Advisory Council* (RMAC)¹¹ 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.¹² 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,¹³ 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 ACT 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.

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. The key is getting veterinary expertise onto farms to undertake passive biosecurity surveillance and work with primary producers to improve farm planning and practices. Incentive schemes are needed like [Animal Welfare Pathway](#) in the UK, which funds annual veterinary health and welfare reviews and then supports improved on farm infrastructure and programs to improve health and welfare. Similar programs in Australia could leverage existing schemes like BIOCHECK(TM) and WELFARECHECK(TM).

Disaster response

The current Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), a cost-sharing initiative between the Australian Government and State/Territory Governments, commendably aids individuals, businesses, and communities following disasters. However, a critical gap exists in its provisions, as it fails to include emergency veterinary care for disaster-affected animals as an eligible relief and recovery measure. The consequences of this omission in DRFA have led to government support arrangements for disaster impacted animal welfare varying greatly across the jurisdictions and is non-existent in the ACT. Despite the essential nature of these veterinary care services to disaster impacted animals, often the financial burden is relegated onto veterinary private practice.

The engagement and coordination of veterinary support to disaster impacted animals is outlined in the ACT Recovery Plan. However, this plan is not publicly available and as such the arrangements are unknown to the veterinary sector.

To ensure animal welfare is sufficiently supported, the AVA strongly believes that arrangements for veterinary services to disaster impacted animals needs to be clearly recognised within the ACT emergency arrangements and assistance measures. This will ensure the provision of necessary

¹¹ 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>

¹² 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.

¹³ 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



veterinary services in disaster-stricken areas, safeguarding animal welfare and reducing the financial strain on private veterinary businesses.

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.

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.¹⁴ The same study found that the pro bono nature of wildlife care limited the timeliness and extent of the care able to be delivered.

Implementation of this proposal would be best undertaken by Wildlife Health Australia, as they already have a limited program in place that allows some private veterinarians to recoup costs associated with disease investigations for diseases of importance through the National Significant Disease Investigation Program (NSDIP).

The rising cost of providing veterinary care to wildlife is rapidly becoming unsustainable.

The Crown (i.e ACT 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.

Recommendation 3.1 - Biosecurity funding

In its funding of the biosecurity system the ACT Government commit to including increased specific investment in veterinary services (particularly rural and regional) and supporting delivery of those veterinary services that deliver public good.

Recommendation 3.2 - Animal care during emergency disaster situations

The ACT Government establish a disaster response and recovery fund to support the provision of veterinary care to animals impacted in natural disasters.

Recommendation 3.3 - Veterinary services for wildlife

The ACT 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.

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¹⁴ B Orr, A Tribe. Animal welfare implications of treating wildlife in Australian veterinary practices. Australian Veterinary Journal. 2018;96:475-480.