



Review of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

March 2025

About the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The AVA is the peak professional body representing veterinary professionals and students across Australia. For more than 100 years we have been the united voice of the veterinary profession.

Veterinarians are among Australia's most trusted and respected professionals, dedicated to safeguarding animal health and welfare and supporting the communities they live in.

Our vision and purpose

Vision *A thriving veterinary profession*

Purpose *Building a vibrant future for veterinary professionals.*

At the AVA we champion the veterinary community, advance professional excellence, foster connectivity, and deliver exceptional member experiences to achieve our vision of a thriving profession.

Essential role of the veterinary profession

Veterinary services are essential to Australia's animal health, food security, and economy. They help secure Australia's animal health and livestock supply chain, protecting hundreds of thousands of jobs and easing cost of living pressures through a safe and reliable food supply.

Beyond agriculture, veterinarians support companion animals and their owners, strengthening the human-animal bond and promoting the associated mental and physical health benefits of pet ownership. Animals are not just a part of the Australian way of life; they are deeply embedded in it - socially, culturally, environmentally, and economically, and veterinarians are an essential part of every vibrant Australian community.

Veterinarians play a pivotal role in maintaining the social licence of animal industries, ensuring animal health and welfare meets community expectations. Like human healthcare and education, veterinary services provide both private benefits to individuals and critical public benefits to society, in areas like biosecurity surveillance, wildlife treatment and health and emergency animal disease management.

Recognised among Australia's most ethical and trusted professionals, veterinarians are highly respected and trusted members of their communities. The Governance Institute of Australia's 2023 Ethics Index ranked veterinarians among the nation's top 10 ethical occupations¹.

1. Governance Institute 2023
(<https://governanceinstitute.com.au/app/uploads/2023/11/2023-ethics-index-report.pdf>)



Executive Summary

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) strongly supports the objectives of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (NMHSPA). However, it is crucial that veterinarians and the broader veterinary team—who experience suicide rates higher than the general population—be explicitly recognised as a high-risk cohort under NMHSPA initiatives.

The AVA has undertaken extensive work in this area, including developing the THRIVE Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework and piloting targeted mental health support programs. These initiatives address the occupation-specific stressors veterinarians and the veterinary team face, such as ethical distress, client aggression, and financial strain, all of which contribute to the profession's elevated suicide risk and workforce attrition.

This submission recommends that the Productivity Commission:

- Acknowledge the veterinary team as a high-risk group under the NMHSPA and reference the AVA's THRIVE Framework as best-practice guidance.
- Formally include veterinary professionals and the veterinary team within the NMHSPA's "Tailored Support" and "Suicide Prevention" priorities.
- Leverage AVA-led research and programs to inform workforce sustainability strategies.
- Integrate veterinarians and the veterinary team into broader health and social systems initiatives (e.g., regional mental health taskforces).
- Implement accountability measures to track improvements in veterinarian mental health and suicide prevention outcomes.

Strengthening mental health resources for veterinarians and the veterinary team will directly enhance animal welfare, safeguard Australia's biosecurity, and positively influence public health by ensuring a stable, resilient veterinary workforce.

Introduction

The AVA welcomes this opportunity to submit recommendations to the Productivity Commission's review of the NMHSPA. Veterinarians perform critical public health, agricultural, and animal welfare services, yet systemic pressures have led to a mental health crisis characterised by high suicide rates, ethical conflicts, and workforce attrition.

Drawing on its expertise and initiatives—including the THRIVE Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework—the AVA has developed practical, profession-specific solutions for improving mental health outcomes. This submission outlines the key challenges faced by veterinarians and urges the Productivity Commission to consider AVA-led initiatives when formulating its recommendations. The AVA THRIVE initiative's 3 Pillars; "Prevent, Promote, Protect" strongly align with the NMHSPA's core objectives of early intervention, integrated care, and tailored support for at-risk groups.



Key Issues and Evidence

Crisis in Veterinary Mental Health

Suicide Risk

Veterinarians have an increased suicide risk compared to that of the general population due to many factors, including client aggression, financial pressures and working conditions -such as low wages, long hours and professional isolation (AVA, 2023).

Burnout

Veterinarians experience higher levels of burnout compared to the general public (AVA, *Safeguarding and Improving the Mental Health of the Veterinary Team*, 2021).

Attrition

Thirty-five percent of veterinarians consider leaving the profession within five years of graduation, exacerbating workforce shortages—particularly in rural and regional areas (AVA Mental Health Survey, 2023).

Unique Stressors

Ethical Distress

Around 80% of veterinarians report psychological harm from “economic euthanasia,” where animals are euthanased due to financial constraints rather than medical need (AVA, 2023).

Client Aggression

Forty-five percent of veterinarians encounter harassment at least weekly, with 20% experiencing threats of violence (AVA, 2023).

Financial Pressures

Veterinarians often begin their careers with student loans between \$70,000 and \$120,000, while starting salaries average only \$65,000 to \$75,000 (ATO, 2022). These financial burdens undermine retention and deter graduates from rural positions.

Systemic Gaps

Mismatched Services

Many existing mental health programs (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs) lack veterinary-specific expertise, particularly around ethical dilemmas, client aggression, and the emotional toll of euthanasia.

Stigma and Fear of Professional Repercussions

Sixty percent of veterinarians avoid seeking help due to concerns about professional judgment, licensing implications, or stigma within the profession (AVA, 2023).

Alignment with NMHSPA Priorities

Tailored Support for High-Risk Groups

Issue: Veterinarians require specialised, trauma-informed mental health services that address grief from euthanasia, moral stress (e.g., “economic euthanasia”), and client-related aggression.



Recommendation: Formally include veterinarians under the Agreement’s “Tailored Support” priority and leverage AVA’s THRIVE Framework to develop peer support networks and telehealth counselling uniquely suited to veterinary professionals.

Workforce Sustainability

Issue: High attrition rates among veterinarians threaten Australia’s biosecurity, animal welfare, and rural health services.

Recommendation: Include AVA-led mental health programs (such as “Cultivating Safe Teams”) in future NMHSPA funding rounds and develop rural incentives informed by AVA research.

Integrated Systems and Regional Coordination

Issue: Veterinarians lack access to integrated mental health services that understand the unique occupational stressors of their profession.

Recommendation: Collaborate with Primary Health Networks (PHNs) and local mental health services to create clear referral pathways and ensure veterinary representation on regional mental health advisory bodies.

Accountability and Data Tracking

Issue: There is limited, fragmented data on suicide rates, burnout, and turnover within the veterinary profession.

Recommendation: Establish annual reporting on veterinarian mental health and suicide rates, support longitudinal research, and align data collection with NMHSPA accountability requirements.

Recommendations for NMHSPA Reform

Immediate Actions

- Explicit Inclusion of veterinarians and the veterinary team as a High-Risk Cohort in the 2024–2027 NMHSPA Action Plan.
- Adopt AVA-Led Frameworks and Programs, referencing the THRIVE Framework in NMHSPA policy updates.

Workforce and System Reforms

- Develop Rural Workforce Incentives including student loan (HECS) relief, subsidised housing, or professional development funds - equitable to other health professionals.
- Integrate with Public Health Networks to ensure veterinarians and the veterinary team have representation on regional mental health taskforces.
- Incorporate Mental Health Training into Veterinary Licensing using AVA-led frameworks.

Accountability Measures

- Annual Reporting on Veterinary Mental Health aligned with NMHSPA accountability requirements.
- Conditional Funding Mechanisms linking NMHSPA grants to evidence-based improvements in clinic well-being policies.



- Research and Continuous Improvement through funded longitudinal studies on veterinary mental health.

Conclusion

The mental health crisis within the veterinary profession demands a focused, evidence-based response. Recognising veterinarians as a high-risk cohort and building upon the AVA THRIVE Framework will reduce suicide risk, improve retention, and enhance overall well-being. These measures align with the NMHSPA's objectives of prevention, early intervention, integration, and accountability and will benefit the veterinary profession, animal welfare, rural communities, and Australia's biosecurity infrastructure.

References

- Australian Veterinary Association (2023). **THRIVE Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework.**
- Australian Veterinary Association (2021). **Safeguarding and Improving the Mental Health of the Veterinary Team.**
- Australian Taxation Office (2022). **Income Statistics for Veterinary Graduates.**
- AVA Mental Health Survey (2023).

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