



Queensland Parliament Mental Health Select Committee

Inquiry into the Opportunities to Improve Mental Health Outcomes for Queenslanders

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

February 2022

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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. The AVA consists of over 8500 members who 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.

Summary

Even prior to the onset of COVID 19, there were considerable mental health concerns identified 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. AVA commissioned independent research by workplace mental health consultants, Superfriend, to investigate mental health amongst the veterinary profession. What has been found is that the issue needs to be addressed on multiple fronts, including financial stress, working conditions, and client relations. AVA has made a considerable investment in research and support services for veterinarians suffering mental health issues and is seeking further government support over the next five years to implement the findings of the research.

Background

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.

Veterinary professionals – at greater risk of poor mental health

Research shows the suicide rate in veterinarians is four times higher than it is in the general public.¹ The lack of economic sustainability of the veterinary profession drives many factors which impact on veterinary mental health and wellbeing. Examples of these include excessive hours required of the job, and inability to take leave due to work force shortages. The job carries many stresses (abuse from clients, limited resources) and ethical challenges (e.g. financial limitations of clients impacting the level of treatment which can be provided to patients and the financial euthanasia of animals) that when not managed, lead to

¹ Parliament of Australia, Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Mental_Health_and_Suicide_Prevention/MHSP/Report, 2021.

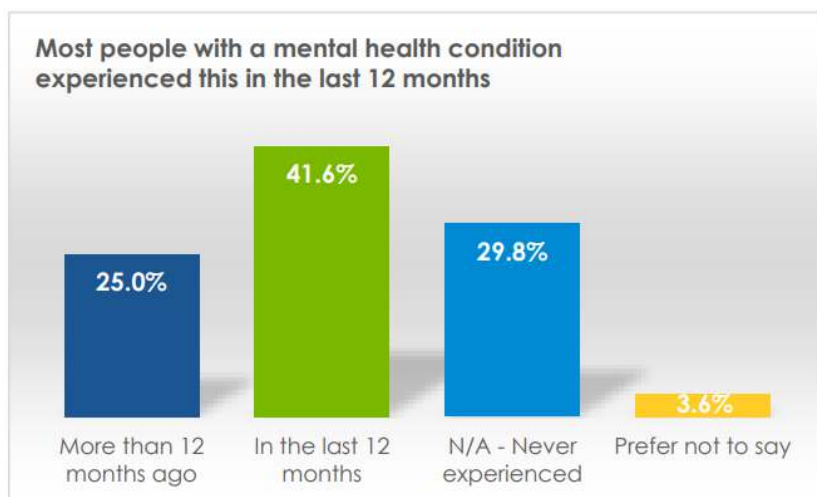


burnout.² These factors combined with poor remuneration has led to high levels of attrition further negatively impacting the mental health of those who stay within the profession.

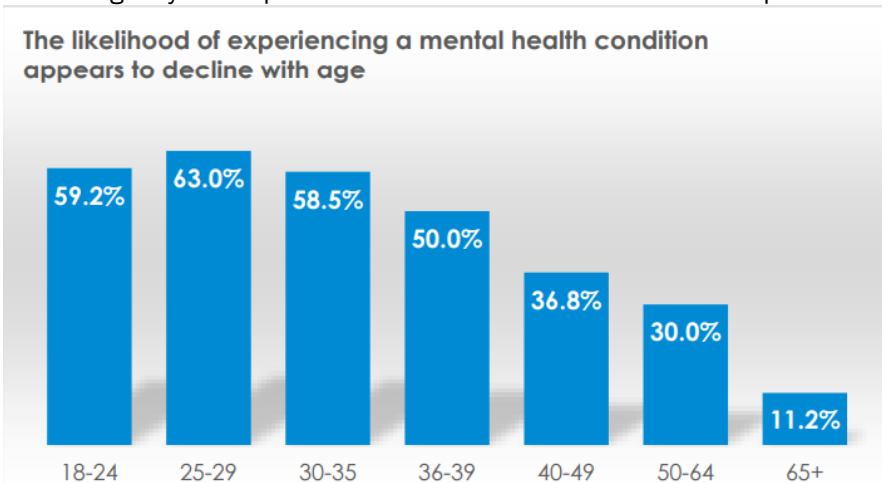
The Superfriend Veterinary Wellness Strategy Final Report found:

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.³

More specifically, 41.6% of respondents to the survey indicated that they had experienced a mental health condition in the past 12 months:

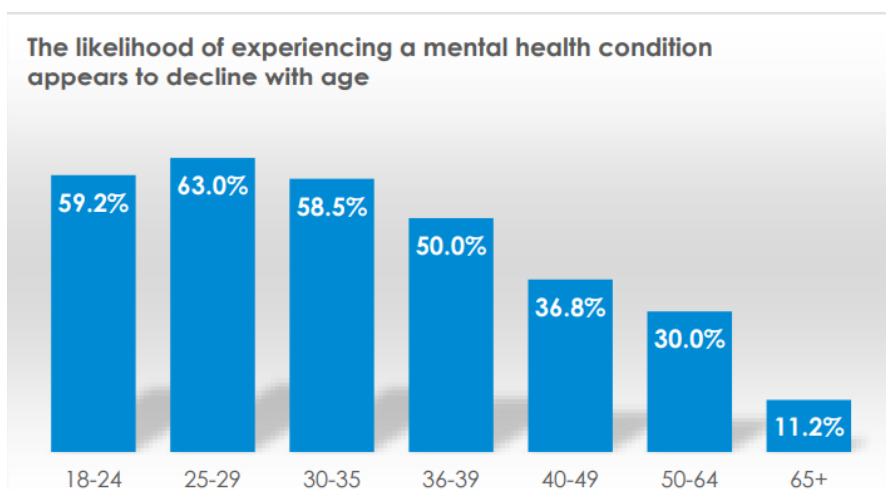


This is more prevalent in the younger age categories, with 63% of respondents between 25-29 indicating they had experienced a mental health condition in the past 12 months:



² Hatch PH et al. Workplace stress, mental health, and burnout of veterinarians in Australia. *Australian Veterinary Journal*, 2011; 89:460-468.

³ Superfriend, *Australian Veterinary Association Veterinary Wellness Strategy – Final Report*, 2021.



These younger cohorts represent the sections of the veterinary workforce suffering from the greatest attrition.

We would like to respond to criteria 1(e) and 1(f) of the Terms of Reference:

1(e) the mental health needs of people at greater risk of poor mental health;

Our research with Superfriend has identified these key work-related risk factors with respect to mental health of veterinary professionals:

- Client interactions & expectations
- Relationships with colleagues
- Poor leadership
- Poor remuneration
- Workplace bullying
- Long hours
- Financial strain
- Workload & pressure

Most respondents who participated in our 2021 research, identified with leaving work feeling emotionally drained (72.5%), which is a major contributing factor to compassion fatigue. 70.1% of respondents felt they had been affected by staff shortages while 58.7% felt work intruded on their personal lives and hobbies. Work impacting the ability to take care of physical health (47.4%) and being unable to take sick or annual leave (46.7%) rounded out the top five negative impacts experienced by veterinary professionals.

The AVA is working with a range of stakeholders on policies and initiatives to address these interrelated issues. Key amongst these are addressing remuneration and workplace issues, community education, mental health education and support for veterinary professionals, and the affordability of veterinary care. However, to affect real-time change that benefits the whole community, the profession requires further support from government.



1(f) how investment by the Queensland government and other levels of government can enhance outcomes for Queenslanders requiring mental health treatment and support.

The AVA has identified a range of areas in which governments could assist:

Public education campaign

A public campaign to educate the community on the important role veterinarians perform in the community every day (from food security, One Health to companion animal care). There would be a focus on the importance of treating veterinarians with respect and courtesy, similar to the campaigns run during the Covid-19 outbreak reminding people to show respect to health professionals, and other front-line workers.

Funding for payment to veterinarians who aid in disaster situations

Veterinarians regularly provide emergency care to wildlife, livestock and pets that have been harmed due to fire, floods, cyclones and other disasters that affect parts of Australia from time to time. While other first responders are either paid or receive some reimbursement for lost earnings, veterinarians currently provide their services, use of equipment and consumables at their own cost to wildlife and to animals whose owners are not immediately available or identifiable.

Government payment of costs of treating wildlife

A 2003 AVA survey found that the amount of pro bono contribution per annum - excluding disaster situations - is over \$10,000 per annum per practice. With Ibis World data confirming 3,355 veterinary enterprises in Australia in 2020-21, even using 2003 figures this comes to \$33.55m per year of lost income for Australia's veterinarians. A more recent study found that the median number of wildlife cases seen by a veterinary clinic each week is between 5-10, with this being higher in regional areas. This is a significant load on the operating costs of veterinary businesses.

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

Welfare of pets

Establish more large-scale programs in conjunction with community and veterinary support that enables community volunteers to walk/exercise pets for people with mental health needs that may also have reduced mobility, or to assist them with care of their pets such as cleaning and changing litter trays or administering medication. Queensland Government could provide funding for co-ordinators of such a program

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