

Hon J Rockliff
Premier and Minister for Health
Parliament House
HOBART TAS 7000

Via email: jeremy.rockliff@parliament.tas.gov.au

Dear Minister

We noted with interest your recent announcement of a scholarship program to encourage allied health professionals completing their final year of study in 2023 to either stay in the state after graduating or relocate and work in Tasmania.

This is a welcome initiative to address the shortage of skilled professionals affecting the delivery of health services in Tasmania.

However, it is not only people who are being affected by the shortage of health workers. The extreme shortage of veterinary health professionals is having a serious impact on the welfare of animals in the state - as well as on the mental health of their carers.

According to the Australian Veterinary Association, there are about 14,000 registered vets in this country, servicing 30.4 million pets. That translates to one vet for every 2171 pets – a figure that does not include horses, farm animals and wildlife. Recent studies have shown that there are only enough veterinarians to meet 60% of the demand. This means that veterinary practices are struggling to keep up with the increased demand for their services, which in turn has created additional challenges around providing the highest standard of veterinary care.

While the shortage is being seen world-wide, the impacts are most evident in rural and regional areas like Tasmania.

The key factor driving this shortage is the anthropomorphisation of our pets. Over the past two decades, pets have moved from the backyard to the family room. People are having fewer children and having them later in life, so pets are becoming beloved family members.

In addition, Australians are the biggest pet owners in the world, per capita, with 70 per cent of households owning a “companion animal”. When pets get sick or injured, their carers demand the sort of medical treatment they’d want for their children.

Vet surgeries across the country are under strain, particularly when so many people bought a pet during COVID. However, the situation in rural and regional Australia is now critical.

This crisis affects us all because, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, animal health, human health and environmental health are linked.

The shortage of vets is exacerbated by worsening mental health due to increasing client demands, rising costs and the stress of dealing with owners who can’t afford to pay for treatment. There is a high rate of burnout due to the “constant and cumulative impact” of moral distress on the job. Vets witness a lot of animal suffering. Some owners have to let their pets die because they cannot afford care while others might refuse euthanasia and instead subject animals to futile medical treatments.

Recent research has shown that veterinarians have almost four times the suicide rate of the general Australian population.

This equates to a veterinarian taking their own life on average every 12 weeks, with 70 per cent of vets reporting that they have lost a colleague or peer to suicide. One in every four people in the industry reports suffering work-related burnout. About six in 10 have sought professional help for their mental health.

It is clear that there is an urgent need to address these issues.

We therefore urge you to consider an immediate expansion of this program to encompass veterinary health professionals.

This would go some way to ensure that veterinary services are economically sustainable, accessible to everyone, and are able to deliver the best possible outcomes for all animals.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jan Davis', with a small dot at the end.

Jan Davis
Chief Executive Officer

4th March 2023