



The veterinary sector –
An essential part of a healthy Australia
2026-2027 Pre-Budget submission to the
Government of the Australian Capital Territory

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
February 2026

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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Veterinarians are an integral part of the fabric of our community. They manage the health and welfare of our livestock that are crucial to our international trade and to the safety and security of our food, and they work in our public health sector on managing disease risks to animals and people alike. They care for the companion animals that are increasingly part of our families.

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.

The AVA appreciates the ACT Government’s invitation to contribute to the ACT 2026-27 budget process. We welcome the opportunity to highlight key priorities for the veterinary sector and animal welfare. Additionally, we welcome the invitation for the AVA to participate in the Chief Minister, Treasury, and Economic Development Directorate roundtables with peak body organisations in February.

The AVA is committed to working with the ACT Government to address critical issues outlined in this submission, to ensure the long-term sustainability of the veterinary profession and the continued health and welfare of the ACT’s animals and communities. **This AVA submission focuses on the critical challenges facing veterinarians in the ACT and provides a range of recommendations to address these issues effectively.**

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 of the Veterinary Sector

The ACT is home to over 40 veterinary premises and hundreds of veterinary professionals. The profession serves the approximately 73% of households in Australia owning pets¹, as well as horses, production animals, research animals and wildlife. Unfortunately, the sustainability of the veterinary profession in the ACT is at risk due to decades of underinvestment which is being felt as a critical veterinary workforce shortage.

For the security of animal industries and the wellbeing of people and animals, it is crucial that the role of veterinarians in animal health, welfare and biosecurity is maintained. To do this, the following are essential:

- Support from regulators and the community to ensure that veterinary expertise and advice is sought and integrated in every level of decision making around biosecurity and the health and welfare of animals
- Increased investment in 'public good' services to ensure that these vital services can be sustainably provided by the veterinary profession
- Addressing the veterinary mental health crisis by taking action to tackle the mental health challenges facing veterinary teams, including workforce shortages, financial stress, working conditions, and client relations.

Pets are important to Australians as evidenced by one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world. Around 86% 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.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.

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. The role of veterinary services underpin the social licence by which animal industries operate. As with 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.

¹ Animal Medicines Australia, A national survey of pets and people 2025

<https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/resources/pets-in-australia-a-national-survey-of-pets-and-people-3/>

² 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

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Livestock industries value September 2023.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/agriculture/livestock-products-australia/sep-2023>



ACT Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations - Summary

1. Support for veterinary care for persons experiencing vulnerabilities.

- 1.1 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government investigate providing subsidies for veterinary care of low-income earners.
- 1.2 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government provides facilities that are suitable and allow ACT residents experiencing vulnerability, such as fleeing Domestic and Family Violence situations, to take animals in their care with them.

2. Support for veterinary public good activities

- 2.1 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government assumes responsibility for and financially supports the costs incurred by veterinary practices when treating or caring for Crown-owned wildlife and also unowned animals.
- 2.2 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government, as part of its biosecurity funding, commit to increased and targeted investment in veterinary services. This should include enhanced support for surveillance and response activities, as well as the delivery of veterinary services that provide significant public good.
- 2.3 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government establish a disaster response and recovery fund to support the provision of veterinary care to animals impacted in natural disasters.

3. Sustainability of the veterinary workforce

- 3.1 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government provide targeted funding to support veterinary students undertaking clinical placements in the ACT. Specifically, the Government should introduce allowances to cover accommodation and travel costs for students, addressing the financial barriers associated with “placement poverty.”
- 3.2 The AVA recommends that 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.

4. Mental health support for the veterinary profession

4.1 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government commit to funding (\$165,000 over 4 years) to support THRIVE, the AVA's wellness initiative, which supports ACT 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, include:

- Cultivating Safe Teams Aware and Action programs
- Expand the 24/7 AVA Counselling Service
- Mental health first aid for veterinary teams



1. Support for veterinary care for persons experiencing vulnerabilities.

The human-animal bond provides significant mental and physical health benefits, reducing pressure on government-funded health services and aligning with public health goals. However, barriers to veterinary care, particularly for low-income earners and animals in domestic violence situations, highlight the need for government support through subsidies and animal-friendly facilities. Supporting the veterinary profession's sustainability and fostering collaboration with government and charities are essential to ensure equitable access to veterinary care and meet community expectations for animal welfare.

AVA ACT 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations

1.1 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government investigate providing subsidies for veterinary care of low-income earners.

1.2 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government provides facilities that are suitable and allow ACT residents experiencing vulnerability, such as fleeing Domestic and Family Violence situations, to take animals in their care with them.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

The Human-Animal bond has been shown to provide significant health benefits to humans, including improvements in mental and physical well-being. As of March 2025, Australia's estimated pet population is 31.6 million equating to 73% of Australian households own a pet, with 86% of these owners reporting positive impacts on their quality of life. This bond contributes to stress reduction, enhanced cardiovascular health, and improved social interaction. These benefits, by extension, help reduce the demand on government-funded health services, such as mental health support and chronic disease management. Consequently, promoting pet ownership and animal care aligns with broader public health goals, benefiting both individuals and the public health system.

For people experiencing homelessness and vulnerability, pets provide vital companionship, emotional support, and a sense of purpose. This bond can reduce loneliness, support mental wellbeing, and offer stability during uncertain times, highlighting the importance of recognising and supporting the human-animal relationship.

Any animal that is under human care in Australia should be able to access veterinary care, and strategies must address the barriers to accessing that veterinary care. Strategies to improve the sustainability of the profession through supporting the workforce will improve access to veterinary care. Given that the structure of the profession has evolved as 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 synergy and symbiosis with government veterinary services and charities.

In 2025, 12% of pet owners required financial assistance for veterinary care. Although cost-of-living pressures are not significantly impacting the majority of owners, the [Animal Medicines Australia research](#) highlights growing concern for this vulnerable cohort, who are experiencing greater financial strain and are more likely to surrender their pets or make health-related sacrifices, including skipping routine check-ups and vaccinations.

Currently, financial support of veterinary services for clients facing hardship is only available through charities such as [ACT Pet Crisis Support](#) or [Pets In The Park](#), or through the provision of discounted or pro-bono services by the veterinary practices themselves. While veterinarians are best placed to deliver these veterinary services, it is not appropriate that they are expected to also fund it. Most veterinary practices are small businesses, and this places significant strain on their financial viability.

The community increasingly has stronger expectations on the need to care for the welfare of animals (whether they be pets or livestock). Part of this welfare is access to appropriate veterinary care. As such, the community itself (through government) needs to make provision for the costs of this care where individual owners cannot.

A further area of concern is animals in domestic and family violence situations. An inability to have safe accommodation for pets can be a barrier to victims in leaving dangerous situations. There is a



need for government support to ensure that there are animal-friendly facilities and emergency accommodation available. Additionally, emergency animal boarding options are not always widely recognised within the policing community. Improving cross-sector awareness across emergency services could support safer and more effective outcomes for both pets and their owners during a crisis.



2. Support for veterinary public good activities

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.

AVA ACT 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations

- 2.1 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government assumes responsibility for and financially supports the costs incurred by veterinary practices when treating or caring for Crown-owned wildlife and also unowned animals.
- 2.2 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government, as part of its biosecurity funding, commit to increased and targeted investment in veterinary services. This should include enhanced support for surveillance and response activities, as well as the delivery of veterinary services that provide significant public good.
- 2.3 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government establish a disaster response and recovery fund to support the provision of veterinary care to animals impacted in natural disasters.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

In 2022, the AVA engaged Marsden Jacob Associates to assess the value of the veterinary profession in Australia, exploring both private benefits to animal owners and public benefits to the broader community. The [report](#) examined the roles veterinarians play, from treating individual animals to protecting public health, highlighting the tension between private, fee-based services and [public goods](#) where costs are often borne by the profession.

The study identified market failures within the sector, notably high workforce attrition and mental health challenges, which are not adequately captured by economic data. While veterinary services are primarily privately funded, the profession also provides numerous public benefits, such as emergency care, biosecurity, population control, and wildlife treatment, many of which are government-mandated or expected by the community. The inability of private practices to recoup the costs of delivering these public goods has eroded the sustainability of the profession, contributing to workforce shortages and underinvestment in labour.

To address these challenges, the report recommended mechanisms for the private veterinary sector to recoup public good costs, improved funding for government veterinary services and charities, and collaboration across sectors. It also noted the significant burden placed on private practices to treat unowned animals and wildlife, often without compensation. Legal and ethical obligations further complicate the issue, as veterinarians are expected to care for animals in distress, even outside business hours.

While the ACT Domestic Animal Services and the RSPCA do significant work in urban animal management, convenience of location and professional reputation means that veterinary practices also receive a significant number of stray animals. Veterinary practices largely bear the costs of treating Crown-owned wildlife and unowned animals (such as strays), placing significant pressure on the wellbeing and sustainability of veterinary teams and the profession. While veterinary services are predominantly privately funded and delivered on a fee-for-service basis, governments and communities rely on the profession to provide a broad range of public good services, some mandated through registration requirements and others driven by community expectation. Examples include:

- 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.

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. This has led to underinvestment in the labour component of the profession, a key contributor to workforce shortages. Providing mechanisms for the private veterinary sector to recoup the cost of delivering these services will improve sustainability and support increased investment in the profession, which will enhance 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, as must animal welfare and human welfare charities that facilitate the provision of veterinary services. Additionally, the private veterinary sector must be able to recoup the costs associated with delivering public goods.

Wildlife

Australia has varied and unique wildlife of high intrinsic value and cultural importance. Their interaction with humans is high and many wildlife animals 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.⁴ The same study found that the pro bono nature of wildlife care limited the timeliness and extent of the care able to be delivered.

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

The Crown (i.e 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.

Biosecurity

In many animal industries, particularly extensive farming systems, farmers are not required to engage veterinarians for routine care or disease management. This optional approach to veterinary involvement has led to a reduction in risk mitigation practices, such as regular disease surveillance, which are essential for effectively managing the threat of Emergency Animal Diseases (EAD)

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.⁵ It is unclear if this remains the case, given the continued erosion of supply of veterinary services in rural and regional areas surrounding and within the ACT. The recent Avian Influenza outbreaks in ACT, NSW and Victoria provides cause for concern.

⁴ B Orr, A Tribe. Animal welfare implications of treating wildlife in Australian veterinary practices. Australian Veterinary Journal. 2018;96:475-480.

⁵ 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.



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,⁶ 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, supported by accessible EAD testing, and to work with primary producers to improve farm planning and practices. A critical element of this support is providing veterinarians with resources for timely and accurate disease detection and response.

This integrated approach strengthens our biosecurity framework and protects the health of animals, people, and the economy.

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

⁶ 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



3. Sustainability of the veterinary workforce

Workforce shortages are currently affecting the veterinary industry, including the ACT. The local veterinarian is considered an essential service along with health, childcare and education. The ACT particularly faces unique challenges in attracting and retaining veterinarians, particularly recent graduates and students. Given Australia'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.

AVA ACT 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations

3.1 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government provide targeted funding to support veterinary students undertaking clinical placements in the ACT. Specifically, the Government should introduce allowances to cover accommodation and travel costs for students, addressing the financial barriers associated with "placement poverty."

3.2 The AVA recommends that 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.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

The ACT, like the rest of Australia, is facing a critical shortage of skilled workers across multiple sectors, including the veterinary profession. This shortage, combined with evolving demands for veterinary services, has led to inadequate capacity to meet community needs. 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

The Australian Veterinary Association's (AVA) 2023/24 Workforce Survey highlights the severity of the recruitment issue. The survey revealed that, across Australia, over half of the advertised veterinary roles took more than 6 months to fill and 36.8% took longer than 12 months, or remained unfilled.⁷

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 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 allowances (such as educational fee relief).⁸

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

Veterinary students generally undertake 52 weeks of practice placement during the course of their studies. The type of veterinary practice they experience and the regions they visit contribute to their decision-making about where they will work after they graduate.

One of the ways of helping veterinary students consider future practice in the ACT is to experiencing life and all that is on offer in the ACT during clinical extramural placements is key in influencing students' future practice here in the ACT. However, there are significant financial barriers to doing so, with the student or practice having to cover the associated costs.

⁷ https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/advocacy/workforce-survey/ava-2023_2024-workforce-survey-report.pdf

⁸ Australian Veterinary Association. Veterinary Workforce Survey. 2021. Available from: <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>



The ACT does not have a veterinary school, meaning no local veterinary students are based in the region. The prohibitive costs of travel and accommodation deter students from pursuing placements in ACT veterinary facilities, which are vital for exposing students to the ACT profession and fostering a pipeline of future veterinary staff for 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.

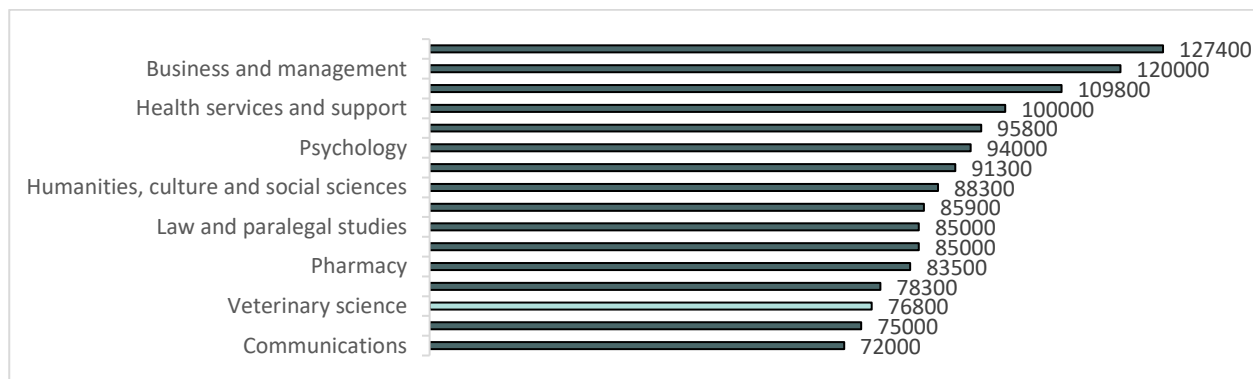
ACT government allowances for accommodation and travel costs associated with students undertaking clinical placements the ACT area will increase the number of students that are properly exposed to veterinary practice in the region and will increase the likelihood that they will see the ACT as attractive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

Several jurisdictions have already recognised the importance of supporting veterinary student placements. In 2025, the [NSW and Tasmanian Governments](#) launched veterinary student support programs including placement scholarships and travel and accommodation subsidies. [NABSnet also provides veterinary student subsidies](#) for placements in northern Australia.

Incentives for recent graduates to practice in the ACT

Veterinarians complete five to ten years of study before graduating with significant debt of \$70,000–\$80,000 for Commonwealth-funded students and up to \$300,000 for full-fee-paying domestic or international students.

Despite this educational financial burden, veterinary salaries remain low compared to similar professions. QILT data highlights that this disparity is particularly pronounced for recent graduates, whose modest starting salaries are further strained by substantial education debts. Compared to graduates from similarly intensive programs, veterinarians face a significant financial disadvantage. Surveys indicate that financial pressures strongly influence veterinary students' career decisions post-graduation.



Postgraduate coursework median full-time salaries by study area (2023)⁹

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'.

⁹ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching. Graduate Outcomes Survey 2023
<https://qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-gos>



4. Mental health support for the veterinary profession

Long working hours, disproportionately low wages, emergency calls and duties, increasing client expectations, veterinary staff shortages and constrained finances are frequent challenges faced by today's veterinarians. If not addressed and managed, these pressures can lead to compassion fatigue and mental burnout, furthering the veterinary workforce crisis.

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

AVA ACT 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations

4.1 The AVA recommends that the ACT Government commit to funding (\$165,000 over 4 years) to support THRIVE, the AVA's wellness initiative, which supports ACT 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, include:

- Cultivating Safe Teams Aware and Action programs
- Expand the 24/7 AVA Counselling Service
- Mental health first aid for veterinary teams

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Burnout and mental health challenges within the veterinary profession stem from chronic underfunding of its labour component, which has been compounded by profound generational and societal shifts. As more veterinarians choose to actively manage their workload by either reducing their hours or even leaving the profession altogether, those who remain inevitably work even longer hours to cope with the staff shortfall, intensifying the strain on an already vulnerable workforce.

Burn out has been well recognised in the profession for some time^{10 11 12} and the cost to the profession is estimated to be 2.01% of its value due to poor retention and reduced working hours.¹³ 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.¹⁴ This research found:

- Over half (66.7%) of people said they had experienced a mental health condition at some stage. 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:

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ CL Neill, CR Hansen, M Salois. The Economic Cost of Burnout in Veterinary Medicine. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. 2022;9

¹⁴ 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>



- 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.
- 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.

As a result of this research, the AVA has strengthened its mental health initiatives, prioritising an integrated wellness approach that better assesses and addresses mental health challenges across the veterinary workforce.

In 2023/24, the AVA piloted Cultivating Safe Teams (CST) to reduce psychosocial risks in veterinary workplaces, increasing participant understanding of hazards from 33% to 95%. The program is now split into CST Aware, which raises awareness, and CST Action, which helps clinics take meaningful steps to manage risks. The AVA THRIVE program further supports mental health, offering 24/7 Counselling Support and Mental Health First Aid for immediate and ongoing assistance. The Graduate Mentoring Program connects new veterinarians with experienced mentors to strengthen professional support networks. Together, these initiatives aim to build safer, healthier workplaces across the veterinary sector.

To help address the significant mental health challenges faced by the veterinary profession and increase reach, the AVA is seeking funding from the ACT Government to expand its suite of veterinary-specific mental health support programs and to strengthen ethics approved research, evaluation, and benchmarking of these initiatives, including:

- CST Aware
- CST Action
- Expansion of the 24/7 Counselling Service
- Mental Health First Aid for veterinary teams

These programs provide psychosocial health and safety awareness training, mental health first aid, suicide prevention, and counselling for veterinarians and the broader veterinary team.

Without urgent government investment, veterinary mental health outcomes will continue to decline, and the profession will be unable to sustain provision of essential services to Australian communities into the future.



Parliamentary Inquiry into Veterinary Workforce Shortages in NSW

In June 2023, the NSW Parliament established an inquiry into veterinary workforce shortages in NSW. The AVA provided a [comprehensive submission](#) to the Inquiry that discussed the complex challenges, suggested strategies, and provided 16 vital recommendations. AVA representatives also participated in the Inquiry public hearing ([transcript](#) and [recording](#)) and provided further information for the [Committee supplementary question and questions on notice](#).

The [findings and recommendations in the NSW inquiry report](#) are highly relevant to the ACT, which faces similar workforce challenges in the veterinary profession. The NSW inquiry report, published in June 2024, included 17 key findings and 34 actionable recommendations, many of which could be adapted to address workforce issues in the ACT.

The AVA and NSW Government's strong endorsement of the inquiry's recommendations demonstrates a framework the ACT Government could consider adopting. The AVA is also currently working with the NSW Government to progress the development and implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations.

By leveraging insights from the NSW inquiry, the ACT has an opportunity to proactively address veterinary workforce shortages and strengthen the sector through collaborative policy development with stakeholders like the AVA and across the border with the NSW Government.

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