

A Profession Perused

AVA President Dr Bronwyn Orr provides insight on the bigger picture of our profession and its future.

Can you tell us a little about your veterinary career, and how you got involved with the AVA?

I graduated from James Cook University in 2013. Since graduation, I've worked across a range of veterinary sectors including private small and mixed practice, government including policy roles and in abattoirs, not-for-profits including shelter veterinary clinics and emergency centres. Professionally, I've largely focused on welfare-orientated work and have pursued a Masters, College Membership and Doctor of Philosophy in this field while working. I think the diversity of experience I've had so far has really helped me see the value the veterinary profession brings to society. Getting involved in the AVA was a natural extension of this realisation, as the AVA is the peak body for veterinarians in Australia. I'm passionate about advocating on behalf of veterinarians, and being a director and now President of the AVA gives me a remit to advocate for vets (and the great work vets do) all day, every day.

How do you feel the profession has been impacted by the pandemic?

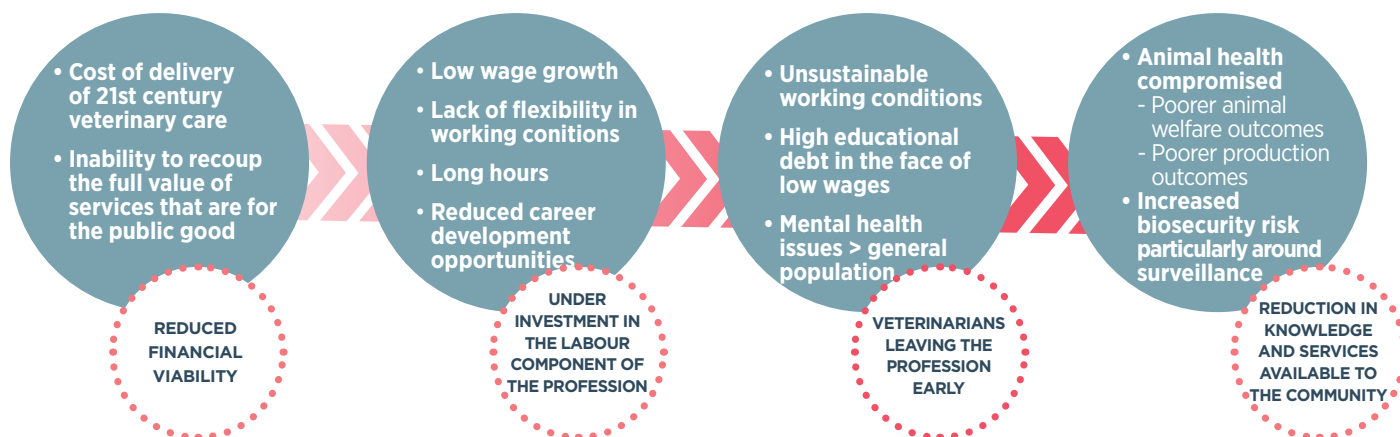
The pandemic certainly brought challenges to the profession, as it did to all sectors of society. In the early stages, the AVA had to advocate to all state and territory governments

to get veterinarians listed as an 'essential' occupation to allow freedom of movement for vets. Shortages of PPE and other supplies were a frequent issue. Contactless consulting and curb side appointments became a 'new normal' and the profession struggled with shortages of experienced veterinarians and nurses. I think many veterinarians are in desperate need of a break after nearly two years of stress, uncertainty and increased workload.

Which factors underlie the ongoing shortage of veterinary staff? Is this expected to improve?

The shortage of experienced veterinarians and nurses is influenced by many different factors. Increased demand for part-time and flexible work, ongoing attrition from the profession, mental wellbeing of the profession, salary expectations, increased demand for veterinary services and a worldwide shortage in veterinary staff are all contributing to the issues being faced here in Australia. There are many proposals which may help ease this pressure, however none are a 'silver bullet' and most will require time to fully realise their benefits.

Below is one way of visualising the pathway to a reduction in veterinary services in Australia:



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Dr Bronwyn Orr

is a 2013 JCU graduate passionate about the veterinary profession. Since graduating, she's completed a Master of Science degree, Membership with the Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree. She has experience across small and mixed practice, government, shelters, academia and policy. She currently works in government, emergency medicine, shelter medicine and academia.

What are some key highlights/lowlights from the state of the profession's mental health from the AVA Veterinary Wellness report?

Over 2,500 veterinary professionals were surveyed as part of the AVA's Veterinary Wellness Strategy research in conjunction with Superfriend. While most people rated their mental health as very good or good, importantly 1 in 6 rated their mental health as poor or very poor, with women, students, veterinary nurses and people aged between 25-29 most likely to identify with having poor mental health.

Negative interactions with the general public and challenging client behaviour had the biggest impact on mental health, whereas positive relationships with colleagues was the single most important protective factor when teamwork, camaraderie and collaboration were actively present.

What is the Thrive initiative and how can practitioners get involved?

THRIVE is the AVA's veterinary wellness initiative that aims to support veterinarians and veterinary staff to lead satisfying, prosperous and healthy careers. We are working towards a sustainable model that will lead to measurable, positive changes in the mental health of our profession. Planning is underway to develop an industry specific mental health framework and suicide prevention and intervention strategy which aims to manage risks across the profession; and provide individual workplaces the necessary support to implement their own mental health and wellbeing strategies.

We have recently asked practitioners and other interested stakeholders to express their interest in joining our veterinary wellness steering group, and the response was humbling. Once established, this group will inform best practice for our future activities, some of which will include:

- A wellness roundtable discussion
- Online stakeholder focus groups
- Wellness symposium

An integrated approach to wellness will underpin all our future programs within THRIVE; preventing harm, promoting the positives of the veterinary profession and protecting those in crises.

To achieve our vision of a sustainable and thriving profession, it will require a multi-pronged approach and collaboration across the whole profession – we're rolling up our sleeves to get ready for the work ahead and call on the veterinary industry to do the same.