

A SERIOUS PROBLEM

The Shortage of Equine Veterinarians

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A very different subject this month but one that is important for horse owners to be aware of – the current shortage of equine veterinarians.

Across the world, in the last few years, it has become widely acknowledged that there is not only a shortage of veterinarians, it is particularly evident in the equine veterinary profession. This fact is **very** true here in Australia. Sadly this problem may get worse before it gets better and is a very serious concern for equine veterinarians and horse owners alike.

Being an equine veterinarian is a truly amazing job and I know that those that

are in it stay because they really love it, however it's a very tough profession to be in and sadly there are difficulties attracting new graduates into the profession and then retaining those that are in it. Being an equine veterinarian, despite what many think as being the perfect job, is actually very stressful and difficult.

In this article, we are going to look at some of the reasons why and what you, the horse owner, need to understand and how you can help.

Cold hard facts

Many of the studies on veterinarians entering the equine discipline are based on figures from the USA. Such studies have not been published in Australia, but our situation is very similar and mirrors what is happening elsewhere.

Close to a third of applicants to veterinary schools in the USA say their career aspirations are to be an equine veterinarian; sadly by the time students are accepted and finish four years of their study, in the last decade the percentage of veterinarians entering equine practice after graduation has dwindled to less than 1.5% (AVMA, AAEP 2017). In 2020, 1.4% of graduates took roles in private equine practice after graduation, with another few taking equine internships in equine practice.

Here is the chilling fact – just over 50% of those small figures then exit equine practice within five years of graduation. This trend of dropping out of equine practice within five years of qualifying is occurring here in Australia too.

These figures are supporting the significant anecdotal evidence of the difficulties in attracting and retaining veterinarians in equine practice. Many equine veterinarians that are still practising are over 50 years of age and hence there is likely to be a significant

number of retirements in the next decade, these positions are becoming harder and harder to fill. In Australia, there are many equine practices that are short-staffed and have been advertising for equine veterinarians for some time and struggling to fill roles. There are even equine practices that are saying they will have to close because they can't get staff.

Equine practice is becoming busier and busier – there are figures from the USA suggesting that despite COVID, practices were busier in 2021 than they were in 2020 which was busier than 2019.

What does this mean?

Equine veterinarians are extremely busy and as a consequence, one study reports equine veterinarians citing high levels of exhaustion and low levels of self-care. As many are aware, the veterinary profession has a very high rate of suicide (a study in JAVMA showed that veterinarians are 3.5 more times likely to die by suicide than members of the general population) – sadly we are not exempt from this fact here in Australia with reports of a veterinary suicide once every two to three months – this is very chilling.

Why is this?

The reasons are a very complex integration of many, many different factors – there are many reasons why veterinarians are not entering equine practice and why there is a high attrition rate before five years of being in the position.

Some of the main reasons include:

① Lower salaries compared to small animal practitioners

This is compounded by the fact that the level of debt of new graduates upon qualifying is very high and that salary does play a significant role when

selecting jobs. Another fact, despite many suggesting that veterinarians are in a rich profession is that veterinarian salaries are well below those of other similar professions such as doctors, lawyers and accountants. Being a veterinarian is not all about the money despite what is often touted.

2 Longer work hours in equine practice

There are strong competitive forces attracting veterinarians into small animal practice, not only because of the higher salaries but because there are less after hours work (due to emergency centres), shorter work hours and more flexible work weeks. The small animal roles are understandably more attractive to new graduates as a consequence, even to those that thought they were destined to be equine veterinarians. In recent weeks, I have communicated with many veterinarians that have left equine practice and gone into small animal practice. One of the biggest reasons was higher salaries and more flexible work hours, especially for women that were raising families. Many of these veterinarians said their heart was with equine practice and they really missed it, but they had to make the change for personal life reasons.

3 Dangerous profession

As you, the horse owner knows, working with horses can be dangerous. They are large, flighty and unpredictable animals. A recent survey in the UK by BEVA was chilling reading – equine veterinarians sustain a very high number of injuries compared to other civilian occupations, including those working in the construction industry, fire brigade, police and prison service.

In the survey, there was a very high incidence of injuries reported to limbs and the head. The main cause of injury was a kick with the hindlimb, followed by a strike with the forelimb, and then crushing injuries. Nearly a quarter of the injuries resulted in hospitalisation and notably, 7% resulted in the loss of consciousness. Unfortunately, the majority of these injuries occurred when the vet was working with a “pleasure” horse and that the handler was the owner at the time of injury, rather than professional clients. This survey was a serious wake-up call to those of us in the industry, and that the risks of injury are significant.

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Dr Oscar Griffiths caring for two little foals.

4 After hours work

Small animal owners in many areas have the option of emergency centres when it comes to emergency and after hours calls. This is not the case in equine practice – equine veterinarians are often on call and covering emergencies is tough. The work, although it can be interesting and rewarding, is often in non-ideal circumstances and in hours when most people are asleep or enjoying family time. After hours work can be extremely challenging with veterinarians running from one emergency to another, and then the veterinarian having to face up to a normal day's work the next day. In my recent communications with equine veterinarians, many reported how difficult and stressful after hours work is and that many would rather not do it. As a consequence, many equine veterinarians are electing to not offer after hours services, and those that do are then

becoming even busier and stretched. As a horse owner, finding a veterinarian after hours is becoming more and more difficult.

There are many other factors influencing the shortage, but these summarise some of the main ones.

What does this mean for the horse owner?

The effect of the equine veterinary shortage on the horse owner is serious – it is going to become more and more difficult to get a veterinarian to attend to your horse with longer wait times and sadly for some, very limited after hours services.

What is the answer?

Unfortunately, there is no quick fix or easy answer – making the changes that are needed will take time. Within the industry, now that this has become critical, there is much being done to try and slow the leak and to help retain equine veterinarians. This includes the universities at the education level of the undergraduates, within equine professional bodies and within equine veterinary businesses.



A team of vets and nurses (WestVETS) working on a case together.

“Equine veterinarians sustain a very high number of injuries compared to other civilian occupations including those working in the construction industry, fire brigade, police and prison service.”

Some of the most important changes are making conditions comparable to the “other side” – the small animal positions in terms of more flexibility with hours, life work balance and salaries. With many equine veterinarians now being female, it is important to ensure that they can have flexibility within the profession to raise their families.

What can I, as a horse owner, do?

It is totally understandable that horse owners are worried about this shortage and what is happening with their ability to get veterinarians. However, there is a role for owners here too. After talking to colleagues across Australia, the UK and the USA on this subject, this article could be very long but a brief summary of some of the comments made:

1 Respect your veterinarian's time

Recognising that being an equine veterinarian, although the best job in the world, is actually very tough currently – showing some kindness and understanding to your veterinarians will go a long way.

- If you have your veterinarian's phone number, please respect that sometimes they may not be able to answer immediately whilst working, or that there may be times when they are not at work and utilising much-needed downtime.
- Respect your veterinarian's time when they are working and if you have an appointment and want other horses seen or your friend would like a horse seen, then schedule it rather than assume they can just take a look! Most of the time they can, but seeing a few extras without warning makes the veterinarian even more late! You

can't take your friend to your doctor's appointment and ask the doctor to take a quick look!

- If you have an appointment then please have your horses caught or at least in a small area – waiting or helping to catch horses from a mob in a huge paddock isn't part of the veterinary service and does waste considerable time.
- Be prepared to travel horses to your veterinarian's facility – whereas much can be done in the field, sometimes it is much safer or optimal to have procedures performed in a hospital environment with appropriate and professional assistance and dedicated equipment. As equine veterinarians become busier, it is now better use of their time to see horses in one location rather than travelling huge distances. It is also much safer. This may actually become the norm as the veterinary industry changes.

2 Patience

Unfortunately the days of getting the veterinarian you want when you want and immediately is unrealistic, given how busy equine veterinarians are currently.

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- Horse owners may have to wait for an appointment with non-emergency cases and see another veterinarian if their favoured one isn't available. Sometimes this may be a veterinarian you haven't met before, but please give them a chance!
- If you have called or emailed your veterinarian to have a chat – be patient in waiting for a response. Given how busy they are, they may not be able to respond immediately. Emergencies should be called in through your veterinarian's preferred method, as these obviously take priority.
- Given how hectic the veterinarian's day can be and also the emergencies that occur sometimes, your appointment may be delayed – this unfortunately is inevitable as our days are very full. Some understanding of this helps.

3 Money

And now the elephant in the room – paying for veterinary services. Owning a horse is a choice and not a right, they are not cheap to care for, have the ability to injure themselves easily and veterinary services can be expensive. Veterinary services, unlike human medical services, are not subsidised by Medicare and thus often appear extortionate compared to that of your doctor – if only there was government support for veterinary services, but that is an unrealistic expectation. Private practitioners are a service, not a charity. The overheads for veterinarians are huge. Even those on the road have to pay for their equipment and ongoing training.

The constant tirade that is heard of “veterinarians are so expensive, money grabbers, only in it for the money, are a license to print money etc” becomes very demoralising and actually devalues the veterinarian. Just as you as an owner have a right to earn a living from your chosen career, so do veterinarians.

Whereas getting a bill for veterinary services can be a bit of a shock, please pay promptly. Nowadays like every other service, veterinarians may expect payment at the time of attendance, especially if you are unknown to that veterinarian. If there is going to be a large bill then often a deposit is now required at the time – this is no different to seeing a small animal veterinarian.

Sadly the days of veterinarians being able to offer payment plans are over – they are

small businesses and not credit agencies. If a payment plan is required then there are alternatives such as Vetpay and Zipay that can help out.

Owners have been used to calling their veterinarians for help over the phone, and this is a regular part of the veterinarian's day – we are always on the phone! However, if you haven't used that veterinarian before, or it is a long phone consultation, then be prepared to pay for the consult in the same way as doctors now performing telemedicine consults. Telemedicine is certainly a convenient and easy way to seek help and is becoming more popular in some cases.

4 Grievances

Just as in any walk of life, sometimes things go wrong or you get a different result than you were hoping for. Rather than air your concerns on social media where it often becomes a witch-hunt, the right thing to do is to contact the management of a practice or the veterinarian themselves and discuss in a correct manner. It is much easier to resolve issues in this way.

5 Vaccination policies

Another controversial subject, but one that needs to be aired here – if you are in an area where Hendra cases have occurred, veterinarians may have vaccination policies and won't attend unvaccinated horses. These policies can vary as it is up to the individual business to make their own risk assessment. You may not agree with their policy, but just as you have the right to choose on whether to vaccinate or not, so does the veterinarian on whether to attend. If you are unable to vaccinate your horse or choose not to, then have contingency and have plans for if you do need a veterinarian. Check out which veterinarians may attend, but also any limitations they may have in doing so, or be prepared to travel your horse to a veterinarian that does, but recognise they may have limitations when confronted with a sick unvaccinated horse. It is best to be prepared in advance.

6 Access to medications

In order for a veterinarian to supply prescription medications to a client, there **has** to be a valid client–veterinarian relationship, and to prescribe the veterinarian has to have attended that horse within the last year. **This is law.** It can be very hard for practice staff to

deal with owners requesting medications when the horse hasn't been seen for years, or when the owner has never even used that practice. Please be mindful of this and expect that you will have to have your horse seen before medications are prescribed.

7 After hours calls

As mentioned before, after hours work is tough and many vets are now not offering this as a service. As a consequence, in an emergency after hours it may be hard to get a vet, with owners often calling many. Prior planning and finding out which of your local vets covers after hours **before** an emergency occurs is strongly advised. Some practices will only cover their own client's emergencies, so if that is the case develop a client–veterinary relationship; use them for your routine work.

Unfortunately, the vets that cover after hours work are often very busy and may not be able to attend immediately, and as a result of having several cases requiring attention, there may be a considerable wait; whereas as this is far from ideal, it is not uncommon. Please be mindful of that when speaking to the veterinarian – don't get angry at them or call them names (sadly this does happen and is very distressing). That doesn't help an already difficult situation.

Be prepared to travel your horse to a veterinarian – this sometimes is the best option, particularly when a veterinarian is busy and unable to travel long distances.

After hours call outs can be expensive, but once again, please pay for the service promptly, and many will expect payment at the time of attendance, especially if you are a new client without a history – don't get angry at the veterinarian for requesting this, it devalues their service.

Summary

Being an equine veterinarian truly is the best job in the world, and most equine veterinarians absolutely love what they do. However it is not easy and is, in fact, getting harder to maintain a healthy life work balance. There is an equine veterinarian shortage globally, and unfortunately it may get worse before it gets better. The industry is going to have to change to attract and maintain veterinarians in the profession. Much is being evaluated and changing within the industry at all levels, but you the horse owner also can play a role in respecting your veterinarian and their time – after all, we are all in this together for the good of our much-loved horses. 🐾