

OFFICIAL



REPORT ON VETERINARY FEEDBACK FROM 2023 VETBOARD FORUMS AND SURVEY

VETERINARY PRACTITIONERS REGISTRATION BOARD OF
VICTORIA

3 JUNE 2024

OFFICIAL



TABLE OF CONTENTS – REPORT ON 2023 FORUMS AND SURVEY

Introduction	3
Key issues.....	3
Understanding your views and priorities	4
Future consultations	6

INTRODUCTION

In late 2023, the Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria (the Board) held 7 forums with veterinary practitioners and invited vets to complete a survey to inform development of the Board's 2024-27 Strategic Plan.

127 vets attended the Board's forums and 217 vets completed the survey on the Engage Victoria website, respectively 3% and 5.4% of the approximately 4,000 vets registered at the time.

The workshops and survey were used to gain insight and build understanding of the future direction of the profession. A clear picture of the trends and issues affecting provision of quality veterinary care across Victoria emerged at the workshops and in the survey and is summarised in this report.

The Board reflected on these issues and insights when developing our strategic plan for the 2024-27 period, which is published simultaneously with this report. The overall goal of the actions in the strategic plan is for the Board to be a better and more effective regulator, with a positive influence on the quality and sustainability of veterinary practice in Victoria.

KEY ISSUES

Questions asked at the forums and in the survey included:

What are the biggest issues for the future of veterinary practice in Victoria?

Which of a selected list of issues should the Board address in its next strategic plan?

What can your Board do more of, less of, start doing and stop doing to bring a "picture of success" to life?

Dominant themes included workforce shortages, rural vs metropolitan service delivery, after hours service delivery, the mental health of veterinarians, and involvement of veterinary nurses and technicians in delivering veterinary services. After-hours veterinary services were noted as a specific concern in regional areas.

In the survey, practitioners prioritised the following issues:

1. Retention of veterinary professionals within practice – 81% of respondents (176)
2. Health and wellbeing of the veterinary team – 62% (136)
3. Roles and regulation of vet nurses and technicians, other allied animal health personnel – 55% (120)
4. Appropriate knowledge, skills and behaviours of veterinarians – 50% (108)
5. Practical access to veterinary services (including telehealth, emergencies, service availability) – 41% (89)
6. Sufficient numbers of veterinarians entering the Victorian profession (graduates, other registrations) – 39% (86)
7. Veterinary business sustainability, including changing business models – 36% (79)
8. Animal welfare – 33% (71)
9. Biosecurity/disease preparedness – 32% (69)
10. Climate and other social/environmental emergencies – 27% (58)
11. Expectations and behaviours of animal owners – 27% (58).

Survey respondents also provided supplementary commentary, stating concerns about:

- insufficient registration pathways for international veterinarians (especially specialists)
- prescribing practices including supply of medicines for wildlife
- changes in the veterinary profession, including corporatisation and telehealth
- inadequate remuneration and increasing costs
- inadequate support for graduate vets
- the behaviours of animal owners and the public towards the veterinary profession (in person and on social media), including a perception that the Board "protects the public" to the detriment of the profession

- the Board's handling of complaints, including time to resolution and resulting stress
- the combined effect on the mental health of vets of workforce shortages (including fewer vets that deliver services after hours), the behaviours and expectations of the public and animal owners, the cost of living and Board expectations and processes.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR VIEWS AND PRIORITIES

The veterinary workforce shortage was prioritised as a key issue for Vetboard Victoria by many veterinarians.

The workforce shortage is connected to the Board's role in registering and regulating the profession in that it affects access to timely veterinary care and the ability of veterinarians and their teams to perform at their best.

A thriving veterinary profession relies both on sufficient *supply* of skilled professionals and retention of veterinarians in the profession. Retaining veterinary professionals ("*sustainability*") requires enabling rewarding work and appropriately recognising performance, and addressing the multiple causes of veterinary disengagement, mental health problems and poor wellbeing¹.

As a regulator, Vetboard Victoria has opportunities to influence supply and sustainability through the exercise of its functions in the *Veterinary Practice Act 1997* ("VPA"). Some factors that encourage a thriving workforce either do not fall within the Board's functions and powers or cannot be addressed due to resourcing and other capacity.

To promote consistent and efficient responses to such matters, we commit to sharing information with key stakeholders, including Government, the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) and the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia (VNCA) and mental health support organisations.

In relation to supply, the Board will explore:

- whether the VPA in its current form allows for the general registration of skilled persons who hold veterinary degrees generally not recognised in Victoria, and
- how qualified veterinary paraprofessionals may be regulated.

In relation to sustainability, the Board will:

- enhance our guidelines about appropriate standards of practice and accompanying resources to:
 - assist vets and their teams to work in ways that engage them to provide diverse and quality care, and
 - positively guide and influence animal owners' interactions with veterinary professionals.
- provide a framework and guidance on Continuing Professional Development expectations and opportunities for registered veterinary practitioners, to encourage the development of non-technical competencies which may help build:
 - self-awareness, communication and business skills in a veterinary practitioner, motivating direction and skills growth leading to a fulfilling, engaging and high-performing professional career, and
 - profession-wide capability to create positive work environments.
- improve Vetboard resources to encourage effective communication and teamwork between animal owners and veterinary teams to reduce the dual risks of unprofessional conduct and of poor mental health².
- increase our communication and collaboration with veterinary businesses and employers to contribute to positive outcomes in the interrelated areas of professional conduct, engagement and wellbeing.
- explore ways to minimise the potential impact of investigation of health and professional conduct concerns on a veterinary practitioner's mental health by providing clarity and updates on the Board's complaint process and links to quality mental health support.
- advise the Minister for Agriculture about workforce issues, their regulatory impacts and possible solutions, including amendments to the VPA which may expand registration.

¹ AVA Great Veterinary Workplaces Policy background www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/great-veterinary-workplaces July 2023

² AVA Superfriends Veterinary Wellness Strategy Summary of Research Findings, 2021



The table below summarises specific feedback received and specific actions we will take. The proposed actions will be taken in the context of the Board’s Strategic Plan and Compliance & Enforcement Policy for the 2024-27 period.

We asked	You said	We will
How well do we live our values?	Show greater leadership of the veterinary profession Demonstrate more responsiveness.	Assist progress towards Victorian vet nurse and technician paraprofessional registration, including briefing the Minister. Hold in-person and online veterinary and public forums around Victoria annually. Introduce short feedback and satisfaction surveys following online or personal interactions with Vetboard Victoria.
How are Vetboard Victoria’s activities perceived?	Be more proactive in strengthening professional practice	Introduce a revised approach to Continuing Professional Development and more guidance about relevant areas of learning. Enhance our resources and links to information, including about clinical governance and effective communication, to address root causes of conflict and complaints.
Which veterinary sector issues should we focus on?	Focus on workforce shortages/professional retention and veterinary mental health. Consider environment of changing veterinary business models, structures and sizes, and the contribution of the broader veterinary team to service provision.	Publicise our current registration policies and pathways and explore expanding pathways to veterinary registration of highly skilled persons. Encourage CPD in non-technical competencies relevant to role and career path. Develop and promote materials for animal owners and the general public on their responsibilities to care for their animals in consultation with their veterinary practitioner, and maintaining a respectful relationship focussed on with their veterinary practitioner. Collaborate with the AVA and VNCA to encourage leadership, teamwork, facilities and systems that support professional and sustainable practice in veterinary workplaces.
What should we keep doing?	90% of survey respondents find our registration process easy and efficient. Good information dissemination	Upgrade veterinary practitioner account portal and explore possibility of providing in-time information and communication about progress of complaint matters. Reorganise information on website for easier navigation.



We asked	You said	We will
<p>What do we need to do more of, or start</p>	<p>Communicate clearly and compassionately.</p> <p>Provide more education on reasonable professional standards and relevant legislation, including examples where practical limitations exist.</p>	<p>Refine our investigations correspondence using compassionate, plain language and links to relevant resources.</p> <p>Facilitate staff, Board and panel member training in compassionate communication and self-care through AVBC by March 2024.</p> <p>Continue to publish quarterly newsletters including case studies and discussion demonstrating professional and unprofessional conduct across the spectrum of veterinary care.</p> <p>Publish quarterly complaint numbers, themes and anonymised outcomes in our regular newsletter from June 2024.</p> <p>In addition to promoting existing videos and factsheets, create Victorian-specific website and newsletter information about our investigations processes, Compliance and Enforcement Policy, and process timeframes.</p>
<p>What should we do less of, or stop?</p>	<p>Prolonged complaint investigations</p>	<p>Publish examples of appropriate reflection and constructive early resolution of complaints in our quarterly newsletters</p> <p>Connect registered vets and animal owners with educational resources, practical tips and a general process for self-managed conflict resolution.</p> <p>Embed our risk assessment framework and refine our investigations processes, delegation and Case Management (IT) System to balance quality with efficiencies.</p> <p>Investigate the use of technology-assisted complaints analysis.</p>

Vetboard Victoria commits to the above opportunities to lead positive change in the supply and sustainability of the veterinary workforce.

FUTURE CONSULTATIONS

Through our discussions at the forums, we recognised that some veterinarians may not fully understand the role of a veterinary board and historically have had little engagement with their regulator other than through annual renewal of their registration. The opportunity to ask questions and provide important guidance for our work was welcomed by all attendees.

Of the 5% of veterinarians who responded to the survey, 42% had had no interaction with Vetboard Victoria in the past 3 years other than through registration, while 27% had visited our website. The survey highlighted similar areas for improvement as the forums, and provided baseline measurements against which we can monitor progress.

As our first engagements of these types in several years, we recognise that less than 10% of Victoria's registered veterinarians and few public and industry stakeholders contributed their views to the Board's consultation. We commit to further opportunities to engage with our service users and obtain their perspectives.