The veterinary profession in Australia is small with about 10,000 full time workers although rapidly expanding. There is a dearth of freely accessible independent information on issues relating to veterinary workforce changes and how these may impact on animal welfare. This site hopes to review the available information and concerns regarding future employment prospects. International veterinary workforce issues, alternative veterinary employment and relevant other professions are utilised as examples.

Australia has at least 30% more veterinarians per capita than the United States and United Kingdom. California has a population of 38 million with two veterinary schools whilst Australia has 23 million people and seven veterinary schools. There will be a 50% increase in the number of Australian veterinary graduates between 2008 and 2013. Unemployment, underemployment and declining wages are appearing.

Recent stats and graphs of the silent victims: The Unemployed

Is there a bubble in the Australian veterinary industry?

In the early 2000’s, three vet schools were built against the advice of the Frawley report. The resultant graduate boom is just becoming apparent.

There is still significant interest in the veterinary degree from students. Are these prospective students aware of the financial and associated animal and human welfare concerns engorging the profession? Or have their eyes been clouded by sources that place veterinarians on a large pedestal?

What happens when this apparent large pedestal ends up as ground zero? The GradStats data shows that the number of veterinarians unable to find full time employment after graduation has more than doubled in the last year and QUADRUPLED in the last 6 years!

A particular concern is that no organisation provides voice for unemployed vets.
(note that pharmacy unemployment is more severe one year after graduation (not on graph) once they have completed their registration year and are no longer cheap labour.)

It is increasingly common that veterinary students have completed another degree before gaining entry which means they are often at university without income for the 6 year veterinary degree plus maybe another couple of years. This means they are significantly behind financially compared to people completing other shorter degrees (teaching, accounting…) when they graduate. The hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost income from being at university becomes an issue for veterinarians with the high living costs in Australian cities and when they decide to start families. Their peak career wages never reach most other occupations either.

With approximately 710 veterinary graduates each year the 19% unable to find employment in the graph would equate to about 135 people. With 30% international and 40% domestic full fee paying that leaves 30% or 40 students that receive government funding of $28,620 per year and are unable to find employment. For the 6 year degree these unemployed veterinary graduates cost the government and taxpayers $23.1 million last year to train. Another 95 full fee paying students went into debt of around $250k each to complete the veterinary degree and become unemployed. There is also the taxpayer cost of unpaid HECS if domestic students are forced to move overseas to find work.

Veterinarians have one of the lowest salaries but also one of the longest degrees and most intense with around 37.9 contact hours per week and compulsory volunteer rotations over holidays versus law degrees with 27 contact hours. Gradstats compares the wages of 23 university degrees and the historical ranking for veterinary graduate wages are shown here:
Vets have one of the lowest graduate salaries out of any profession.

CAREER LONG AVERAGES

(Sources: medicine, vet. Note that bars represent uncertainty of average and not minimum/maximum. Minimum/maximum wages may vary by $50k or more from the average)

VETS PER MILLION PETS AND PER MILLION PEOPLE

(Sources: World Bank, Frawley Report, Heath 2008a, Veterinary Boards, Australian Companion Animal Council, Pratley 2012)
Traditionally the most commonly used statistic for looking at veterinarians has been per capita (brown line). The rise in this line is concerning and suggests increasing supply with decreasing demand although demand is also dictated by the transaction per animal. However a more appropriate statistic is possibly vets per million animals (blue line). More than 70% of vets work with cats and dogs so focus can be placed on these species where data is available. The extremely rapid rise of vets per million cats and dogs is very concerning and probably a considerable determinant in the rising underemployment of veterinarians.

GRADUATE WAGES AND UNEMPLOYMENT 2012

Current graduate wage: $45k

(Using an average 45 hour week and 2 hours on-call at 150% this equates to $16.37/hour – less than a McDonalds burger flipper!)

Trend: decreasing compared to Australian wages

Under/unemployment: 19.2% and rising

The [Good Universities Guide](#) also compares Australian university outcomes for vets:

James Cook University $46,409 and 13% unable to find employment in 2012

Murdoch $47,778 and 8% unable to find employment in 2012 ($47664 and 6% unable to find employment in 2011)

University of Melbourne $47,786 and 30% unable to find employment in 2012

University of Sydney $44,081 and 20% unable to find employment in 2012 ($44082 and 16% unable to find employment in 2011)

University of Queensland $46,393 and 33% unable to find employment in 2012 ($42912 and 11% unable to find employment in 2011)
The wage of veterinarians includes significant on-call work (night calls), weekends and evenings. The mean weekly hours for veterinarians in the United Kingdom is 45 hours including 5 hours overtime that may or may not be paid and about 2 hours on-call. Mixed practice veterinarians do significantly more overtime and on-call, 18 hours versus 9 hours in the New Zealand surveys. Graduate veterinarians are also likely to perform more of the weekends, evenings and on-call because they are cheaper. Weekend and evening work doesn’t attract extra hourly income for most veterinarians. The hourly wage on pay checks is likely to be higher than reality because several hours are often unpaid. The hourly rate is lower in rural areas but they usually perform more on-call work so sometimes have a slightly higher annual income.

Note that differences in employment and income for each university are likely due to the type of students (upper socioeconomic class not wanting to leave city, international students) rather than the university. Employers usually choose graduates on personality and skills rather than university.

The most comprehensive data comes from GradStats. These show veterinary graduate wages were $32.5k in 1999 and $45k in 2011. This is a decrease of 15% compared to the graduate average from all courses! And with the increasing length of the veterinary degree at some Australian universities it suggests a significantly deteriorating return on investment. The number of unemployed graduates has also risen significantly from 4.9% to 19.2% in the same time period.

**AVERAGE WAGES**

Current estimate: $70k
(Possibly up to $80k. Using an average 45 hour week and 2 hours on-call at 150% this equates to $28/hr and up to $32/hr, add 25% for locum rates – see here)

Trend: decreasing compared to Australian wages

Available average wage information is significantly more vague than graduate outcomes. The best data comes from MPV Consulting but is probably biased towards higher earning veterinarians and shows a range from $53,182 for graduates to $93,992 for veterinarians with 10 years experience. The most comprehensive study of Australian veterinarians was done by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) which showed average wages of $52k in 2000. Since then the ABS has only extrapolated veterinary data from their surveys on 0.33% of the Australian population. As veterinarians are such a small portion of the population, a few veterinarians captured by this survey with significant deviations from the average may alter it significantly. Response error is another problem and evident in their data showing 2.3% of veterinarians are 15-19 years of age, which is not possible. However the ABS shows wages of $60.4k in 2006, $81.9k in 2011 and $67.6k in 2012! This varies significantly to the Council of Veterinary Deans which suggested wages of $67k in 2011. The Australian Veterinary Association and Seek suggest a career peak wage of around $76k which fits more closely with the lower figure of the Veterinary Deans. Most veterinary jobs are advertised on specific veterinary websites so the Seek data may also be skewed. MPV Consulting suggests Australian veterinarians earn 31.3% of the fees they charge out to clients. DVM 360 in the United States has a spreadsheet that can determine approximate wages for vets.

The most recent wage survey was conducted by the Australian Veterinary Association in 2012 and showed median wages of full and part timer workers at less than $60,000. However this survey has some limitations.
Veterinarians can expect to earn more for the many evenings and weekends that are normal in their job but this isn’t described in their Award like it is for other professions. Taking 25% extra for night shifts (medical doctors get a legislated 25% for weekdays after midnight, 50% after midnight on Friday and 75% after midnight on Saturday), it could be assumed that average emergency veterinarians earn $43-53 per hour or $89k-110k per annum and utilising the MPV Consulting data up to a maximum of around $60/hr or $118k per annum with 25% extra for locum rates.

Professor Trevor Heath, previous Dean of University Queensland Veterinary Faculty, suggested veterinary wages have been decreasing compared to average Australian wages since 1977. Using the Reserve Bank of Australia Inflation Calculator on the ABS 2000 data this would suggest veterinary wages need to be $72.5k to be matching inflation and the cost of living.

Maximum veterinary wages can be up to $200,000 for a few multi practice owners or the rare specialist (eg. specialist surgeon who owns a practice). But most specialist advertisements after completing the three or more years of training in addition to the veterinary degree are offered at around $100-130k. There appears to be an imminent oversupply of specialists as discussed under another post. About one third of veterinary practice owners earn greater than $140,000. Human medical profession specialists earn on average about two to three times the maximum of the small number of veterinarians earning these higher end wages.

Individual variability is due to multiple factors including negotiation skills, generosity of the employer, replaceability, relationships with staff members, theoretical/practical skills, client communication/sales, and practice profitability.

### Wages per years of experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Experience</th>
<th>Mixed/Large Animal</th>
<th>Average (All vets)</th>
<th>Emergency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Hourly</td>
<td>Locum</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Graduate</td>
<td>58630</td>
<td>28.19</td>
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<td>1-3yrs</td>
<td>61784</td>
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<tr>
<td>10+yrs</td>
<td>101773</td>
<td>48.93</td>
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</table>

Source: MPV Consulting [http://bit.ly/13Yl7bf](http://bit.ly/13Yl7bf) & RBA Inflation Calculator. Note that MPV Consulting captures veterinarians with an interest in business and are NOT averages. The graduate wages by MPV consulting in this table are about $10k higher than those reported by the figures that the government utilises from GradStats.

Adjustments: 25% addition for locum wages to account for lack of holiday pay, 38 hour weeks for All vets, 40 hour weeks for Mixed vets to account for on-call, 25% extra for emergency.

### The Twenty Percent Rule

Many have suggested that minimum veterinary wages can roughly be estimated as 20% of the charges from the clinic eg. MPV Consulting (Australia), [Washington State University](http://www.wsu.edu), and [Veterinary Business Advisors](http://www.vba.com).
So for example if a vet charged for 2 vaccinations, an ear cytology, and worming tablets totaling $220 in an average hour then they should be earning at least $40/hour as a full time employee or $50/hour as a locum.

Equation: \( 220 \times 0.2 \times \frac{47}{52} = \$40/hr \)

Years are based on 47 weeks and 38 hours per week. Note that for on-call work, many use the 50 percent rule.

**WORKING CONDITIONS**

There is a dearth of data on Australian veterinary employment contracts. In Britain we know that students enter the profession with high debt and can have harsh conditions imposed by employers. We also know that British veterinarians have a suicide rate twice that of dentists and four times that of the general population. Dr Bartram in the British Veterinary Record discusses various possible causes of veterinary suicide from euthanasia to finances. Dr Bartram also shows evidence that one third of medical practitioner suicides are due to financial difficulties. In Australia APESMA has looked at pharmacists and found that many are too fearful to notify of illegal working conditions. In fact 25% of pharmacy students would recommend a different career due to oversupply and they only have graduate unemployment of 1.9% compared with 19.2% for veterinary graduates. Utilising this information it might be assumed that veterinarians are treated more poorly than pharmacists.

**FUTURE**

The veterinary degree is already listed as the worst return on investment by Compare Courses due to the high number of years out of the workforce and costs of the degree along with the wages that are less than half that of medical doctors. There are also significant ongoing costs for veterinarians including registration (approx $200 per state per annum), radiograph license (approx $100 per state per annum), indemnity insurance, income protection insurance for illness, microchip license, compulsory continuing education ($1000-2000+ per year for conferences /journal subscriptions /extra qualifications plus associated time), professional memberships ($300-600+ per year). In addition a practice owner needs to pay for a business number, hospital registration, pathology/xray/ultrasound… equipment, rent/electricity, staff… which can all total hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars.
The April 2012 Australian Veterinary Journal (p19) suggests a bleak outlook due to a massive rise in the number of veterinary graduates. Over the last decade the number of veterinary universities has gone from four to seven against the advice of the Frawley Report for government. Australia already has 30% more veterinarians than the United Kingdom and United States. The percentage of companion animal veterinarians has increased to 80% whilst the number of companion animals continues to decline. This is likely due to increased housing density and workforce mobility making it difficult to keep pets. Other inhibitors of pet ownership may include concerns regarding puppy/kitten farming/euthanasia, the 10-20 year commitment required for a pet, and thousands of dollars required for pet care.

Recent data suggests an oversupply of veterinarians by 50% in Australia. Professor Heath suggested there will be “overt signs of oversupply” i.e. unemployment or underemployment (such as veterinarians employed as veterinary nurses).

Veterinarian ‘Joseph Knecht’ from the student doctor network had this to say on the US situation which has similar issues:

“Thirty years paying back a $200K student loan [or not getting a job], not making enough money maybe to save for your own retirement/kid’s education/modest home of your own, still living like a student for many years after graduation; all for the “dream” of saving animal’s lives for owners who will place their financial well being ahead of their pet’s life (sometimes for very sound reasons)….It is so . . . priceless.”

According to a 2012 survey by a United Kingdom animal charity, PDSA, 17% of pet owners would give up their pet if costs became too high. Veterinarians are asked to kill animals because owners don’t want to pay for treatment. In fact cost related euthanasia is the biggest cause of death for pets with diabetes. Cost is also a reason that some owners don’t heed veterinary advice and their animals may suffer as a result. Should these people have purchased animals in the first instance if they haven’t planned financially for their care? Owner financial issues have a close link with the economic sustainability of the veterinary profession.

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