Managing the Changing Face of the Veterinary Workforce

**Purpose**: A one-day workshop hosted by the Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ) to clarify changes in the demographics of the Australian and New Zealand veterinary workforce and to formulate a strategy to ensure that public (client and New Zealand Inc.) expectations of the profession will be met in the future.

**Where**: VCNZ offices, Level 11, Kordia House, 109 Willis Street, Wellington 6143

**When**: Tuesday 26 November 2013

**Participants**: Frazer Allan (Massey University), Ruth Anderson (Health Workforce), Despina Arathimos (VCNZ), Joan Baas (VCNZ), David Bayvel (VCNZ), Mark Bryan (Vet South), Lindsay Burton (Fonterra), Graeme Catt (Australian Veterinary Association), Janet Eden (VCNZ), Ron Gibson (VCNZ), Michelle Hawes (VCNZ), Julie Hood (NZVA), Stephen Hopkinson (Taranaki Vet Centre), Ron Jackson (Veterinary Consultant), Willie Leferink (Federated Farmers), Brett Lorier (MPI Policy), Andrew MacPherson (Landcorp), Steve Merchant (Pet Drs), Prakash Narayan (MPI Policy), Richard Norman (MPI Compliance and Response), Tim Parkinson (Massey University and VCNZ), Mark Stevenson (Massey University), Nick Twyford (VCNZ), Julie Wagner (VCNZ), Jenny Weston (Massey University), Richard Wild (MPI Verification), Norm Williamson (AVBC).

**Apologies**: Ben Gardiner (Australian Veterinary Association), Eloise Jillings (Massey University), Janet Molyneaux (Massey University), Veronica Herrera (MPI Compliance and Response), Sue Ineson and Barbara Benson (VCNZ).

**Introduction**: Ron Gibson (VCNZ) introduced the day by making the point that one of VCNZ’s functions is to advise and make recommendations to the Minister on matters relating to veterinarians and the practice of veterinary science. The impetus for this workshop arose from general workforce discussions within the profession, issues arising from VCNZ’s annual analyses of veterinary workforce data and the Minister’s support for such a meeting to occur.

VCNZ obtains detailed information on the status of the veterinary workforce via a survey sent to veterinarians with their Annual Practising Certificate renewal documentation. The response rate to the VCNZ workforce surveys are consistently 94% or above.

Key points relevant to the veterinary workforce now and in the future made by the presenters were as follows:

**Federated Farmers’ expectations of the vet profession, present and future**

Willy Leferink \hspace{1cm} Federated Farmers

Expectations of veterinarians: Preventative and proactive focus; educate clients to become better farmers; facilitate linkages with others to improve animal performance and care; act as a conduit between animal health and productivity; provide impartial advice on new technology and practices. “We don’t want band aids”.
Government expectations of the vet profession, present and future

Richard Wild  
MPI Verification

Richard Norman  
MPI Compliance and Response

The veterinary profession needs to take a leading role in determining a consistent interpretation of animal welfare standards. Need to know and comply with the requirements of the Code of Professional Conduct. Need to continue to develop a culture of specialisation and referral. Continued need for veterinarians to be aware of NZ primary production in an international context.

MPI employs 200 veterinarians; 50% are international graduates. Rigorous selection processes. Dramatic increase in applications from Australia and the USA. Retention not a big issue.

Vets have an important role in biosecurity surveillance. Incursion investigations need input from innovative diagnosticians, epidemiologists. Importance of vets recognising the benefits of a multidisciplinary approach.

Opportunities for CPD providers in this area.

Voluntary bonding scheme for new graduates

Brett Lorier  
MPI Policy

MPI has a goal to double primary exports by 2025. A competent veterinary workforce is essential to achieving this goal.

The rural bonding scheme (RBS) scheme, initiated by the former Minister of Primary Industries, has been in operation since 2008. The aim of the scheme is to incentivise practitioners to work in areas of the country where there are identified veterinary shortages. Vets receive their first payment after 3 years and the balance over the next 2 years. The scheme has been fully subscribed for the last three years.

Concern was expressed that there is the need to revise the current system of balloting. VCNZ, NZVA and MPI are reviewing the scheme including the question of whether the scheme can successfully target understaffed areas.

To evaluate the success of the scheme there is a need to compare the professional longevity of RBS veterinarians with non-RBS controls.

Practice owner expectations of the vet profession, present and future; retention issues

Jenny Weston  
Massey University

Mark Bryan  
VetSouth

Stephen Hopkinson  
Taranaki Vet Centre

Steve Merchant  
Pet Drs, New Zealand Veterinary Association

There is a continuing trend towards a much higher proportion of female students to male students entering the veterinary programme (80/20 ratio). Do we need to maintain a workforce ‘balanced’ in terms of gender?

The RBS and the global financial crisis (GFC) have assisted with retention of new graduates. Ratio of student debt to income a continuing issue.

Impact of significant increase in Australian graduates not yet known. The number of
Australian graduates registering in New Zealand is increasing.
Male graduates are quicker to secure employment than females.
Employers are of critical importance as determinants of professional longevity. Retention not an important issue in ‘good’ practices, but issues identified in retaining female veterinarians in some rural practices.
What constitutes a ‘good’ practice? Good human resource practices; willingness to develop flexible work hours (female staff in particular); transparent and equitable staff policies; shareholding options; career path (within larger practices).
Continuing gaps: knowledge of farms as a business; ability to ‘sell’ services; geographical isolation.
Continuing issues: tension between professional responsibilities and business outcomes.
Veterinary technicians are important contributors to large practices. Some practices prefer to train their own veterinary technicians (cf employ, for example, Massey BVT graduates).

Other stakeholders expectations of the vet profession, present and future
Andrew Macpherson    Landcorp
Lindsay Burton    Fonterra
Key issues: Animal welfare and environmental sustainability.
Veterinarians seen as valued business partners and competent practitioners but need to be proactive and have animal health and welfare discussions with clients.
Need to up skill from BVSc training. Current level of biosecurity surveillance and residues and antibiotic resistance issues are risk areas. Need ability to think globally and to take a proactive role in using farm data/research to improve performance.

Health Workforce Group – lessons learned
Ruth Anderson    Health Workforce
Health Workforce New Zealand (HWNZ) is a unit within the Ministry of Health. It has responsibilities for planning and developing the New Zealand health workforce.
Need to recognise that the size and composition of a workforce changes constantly as a result of many factors. Knock on effects of the GFC has meant that many of the predictions made by HWNZ need revision.
Critical need to increase the standard of leadership and system intelligence in relation to workforce planning. There is a need to understand and manage the within-country workforce as well as to understand factors driving between-country movements of veterinarians.
Retention issues assisted by career planning mechanisms (allowing health science students to switch to other programmes and not start again; educating students on alternate ways they can use their degrees).
What is the value of the Government’s investment in veterinarian training? Given limited Government funding can we use the workforce differently? Does all of the work carried out by veterinarians require a BVSc? In the health sector physician assistants cover lower level tasks allowing general practitioners to focus on higher order tasks. In the medical profession nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists tend to have greater expertise in certain areas than general practitioners.
Lack of quality mentoring in rural areas is a problem in the health sector and a reason for
staffing problems. Need to adopt regional approaches to workforce planning. Workforce planning is an art, science and skill. Funding always an issue, not always the solution.

**Status of the New Zealand and Australian veterinary workforce 2012 – 2013**
Graeme Catt  
Australian Veterinary Association
Mark Stevenson  
Massey University

In New Zealand in 2012 there were ~57 veterinarians per 100,000 head of population; the equivalent figure for Australia was ~46 per 100,000. Based on workforce survey done in both countries in 2012 (and acknowledging poor response rates in the Australian survey) similarities in the age and gender composition of the veterinary profession in both countries. Number of routine hours worked per week similar; proportions of veterinarians by work role similar.

Australia is currently producing 400+ new veterinary graduates per year with this number increasing to 700+ when the new veterinary schools come on stream. This is expected to lead to an oversupply of veterinarians. Salaries have already decreased as has the number of veterinary graduates gaining work within 4 months of graduation. Feminisation of the workforce (and less work hours) may offset part of this problem. Government veterinary services are reducing with more work contracted out to private practitioners.

The success of one new vet school’s selection criteria weighted to rural practice is still to be measured.

A lack of workforce system indicators in Australia is a concern.

Unlike Australia, international graduates are an important component of the New Zealand veterinary workforce.

**Veterinary training**
Tim Parkinson  
Massey University
Frazer Allan  
Massey University

Gateway to veterinary training depends on student choices made in Year 10 of high school. At this point the attraction in veterinary science as a career tends to be towards the caring nature of companion animal practice. Difficult to enthuse Year 9 students about the core production animal focus of New Zealand veterinary practice.

Some evidence that recruiting students from rural backgrounds retains graduates in rural practice – but more evidence that a positive experience during training works, which Massey works hard to provide. Also, an increased emphasis on consultancy skills, herd health management. At present, 70% of Massey graduates go into rural mixed practice after graduation.

At present 80% of applicants for the BVSc programme are female and 80% of places go to female applicants.

Aptitude test plus academic grades are the basis for admission to the veterinary programme. Correlates well with student’s ability to complete the degree but required grade average required could be getting too high.

No plans to emulate Australian moves towards vet training being postgraduate. Massey degree likely to remain five years because of awareness of income to debt ratio once students have graduated.

No plans to introduce streaming/tracking as some other schools have done (Utrecht, and some of the US schools). The New Zealand veterinary profession supports the current situation where students spend one quarter of the final year working in an area of their own interest.
Formulation of Action Plan from Consideration of the Issues

1. Where does accountability lie for veterinary workforce issues?
MPI, NZVA, VCNZ, Massey University and perhaps major stakeholders such as Fonterra, Federated Farmers and Landcorp?

Whereas Health Workforce New Zealand is funded to take responsibility for workforce issues in the health professions, there is no similar co-ordinating body for veterinarians.

VCNZ will continue to analyse and publish annual data on the veterinary workforce. Is VCNZ the appropriate body to co-ordinate veterinary workforce management issues? VCNZ’s role is to protect public interest by ensuring that veterinarians are competent to practise. Does workforce management and advocacy fall within this statutory brief?

Need for clarification of the role of Government in veterinary workforce issues and the roles of the Ministry of Primary Industries (and how they compare to the Ministry of Health). The current MPI strategy is one of ‘enabling and partnering’ and MPI officials present at the meeting didn’t necessarily see MPI leading this work noting that, at the present time, veterinary workforce management is not a departmental priority. This said, MPI would encourage all stakeholders to collaborate and, if all were ‘on the same page’ a set of agreed objectives could be realised.

There is a need to clarify who contributes financially to workforce management issues. VCNZ is funded entirely from the registration and practising certificate fees paid by veterinarians. It is unreasonable to expect VCNZ to take on additional roles in this areas without receipt of additional funding.

2. Do ‘we’ have a problem? What are the problems?
Who is ‘we’? The public, the veterinary profession, the government.

The problems and/or issues include:

- An ability to simply, objectively and accurately quantify workforce ‘sufficiency’. What is the useful metric: counts of veterinarians or FTE veterinarians per head of population, counts of veterinarians or FTE veterinarians per livestock unit; urban veterinarians per head of population, rural veterinarian per LSU.
- An ability to assess the impact of trained paraprofessionals (e.g. BVT graduates) on the demand for veterinary services.
- An ability to distinguish ‘good’ practices from ‘bad’ practices. Clarification of the features-characteristics of ‘good’ practices.
- An ability to estimate demand for veterinary services (both small animal and large animal) over the next 15 to 20 years. Estimates of demand could then be evaluated in the context of estimates of supply.
- An ability to quantify or document international movements of veterinarians. Are international movements of veterinarians predictable (e.g. number of Australian graduates looking for work in future years likely to increase given their oversupply)? If yes, can this information be used to make short-term changes to New Zealand immigration policies?
- Appropriately dealing with feminisation of the profession (as opposed to having a profession with a lot of women working in it). Ability to make it easier for women to return to work after a period of absence. There is a reduced tendency for female veterinarians to own practices but this is likely to change over time with the increasing numbers in the profession.
Should the age and gender composition of the veterinary profession mirror the general population? Clients for small animals are generally women. This is different from clients in rural areas.

3. What can we do?

- Establish the accountability for workforce planning and the source of funding to achieve its aims.
- Clarify MPI’s position on the role of veterinarians in meeting its goals double primary production exports by 2025.
- Improve workforce modelling. The supply side modelling is largely done. The demand side needs to be clarified. It was suggested that the modelling work carried out by the Australian Veterinary Association could be shared for this purpose.
- Promote career planning for secondary school students.
- Continue to review current BVSc selection criteria.
- Promote career planning mechanisms for veterinary students.
- Consider specific postgraduate year 1 and 2 support.
- Think globally. Approach OIE, IVOC and wider to monitor the flux of veterinarians from one country to another.
- Be innovative. Consider enhanced and new roles for veterinarians, veterinary paraprofessionals and others.
- Better understand practice level impacts on retention. Track veterinarians as to what they do and where they work following graduation. Follow up on those who have left the profession.
- Ask vets requesting a letter of good standing (which usually indicates they are intending to practise overseas) where they are going and why.
- Continue the voluntary bonding scheme.
- Make more use of VCNZ workforce survey data to track the overseas trained workforce with a special focus on Australian graduates.
- Consider using the immigration lever to control supply. Veterinarians are on Immigration New Zealand’s long term shortage list. This is reviewed annually and the requirements can be qualified. For example, by requiring that the current criteria of ‘veterinarian’ for immigration points be amended to require postgraduate experience and/or be restricted to particular disciplines or regional areas of veterinary shortage.
- Analyse practice data. Interviewing graduates who have left, finding out the difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices.
- Improve access to continuing professional development (CPD) training material. Make it easier for women and part-time practitioners to take part in CPD.
- Assess the impact of increased specialisation.
- Capture the level of ‘in-house’ tracking/expertise (MANZCVS membership could be used as a proxy for this). Promote advanced training.
- Learn from the experience of Health Workforce New Zealand. Be prepared to change forecasts and policies due to unexpected events.
4. Initial Actions

- Report that the group met, document the points raised and summarise thoughts on issues raised. Invite comments from: (a) the profession through NZVA and Newsbrief; solicit comments specifically from groups not represented at the workshop (e.g. smaller isolated practices); and (b) Landcorp, Fonterra, Federated Farmers, and MPI.

- Provide feedback to the Minister and MPI. Emphasise the key roles veterinarians play in animal welfare, animal health and productivity, adoption of new technology and practices in the primary production sector. Seek clarification from the Minister on the roles and responsibilities of MPI and VCNZ in this area. Clarify issues related to funding.