



Submission to the Joint Committee on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Veterinarians in South Australia

Submitted by: Cherished Pets Foundation and Cherished Pets Community Veterinary Care (*Cherished Pets*)

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Introduction

Veterinary mental health and wellbeing is a critical issue impacting both the profession and the broader community. As a social veterinary service operating on the Bellarine Peninsula, Cherished Pets Foundation, in partnership with Cherished Pets Community Veterinary Care, witnesses firsthand the growing pressures faced by veterinarians – including burnout, moral distress, and compassion fatigue – which are further exacerbated by increasing client tensions driven by socioeconomic pressures, financial constraints, and complex social issues.

Our human-animal bond-centred model offers a proactive, integrated approach to addressing these challenges by bridging veterinary and social services. By embedding veterinary social work (VSW) into practice, we provide both emotional and practical support to veterinarians while ensuring that pet owners receive the care they need, reducing ethical distress and improving outcomes for all.

We submit this document to highlight the role of social veterinary services and veterinary social work in strengthening veterinarian health and wellbeing, preventing crisis situations by providing much-needed support to vulnerable pet owners and their animals, and enhancing the sustainability of veterinary care.



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Key Challenges Affecting Veterinary Mental Health

Moral Distress and Compassion Fatigue

- Veterinarians frequently face ethically distressing situations, where financial barriers prevent optimal care, leading to feelings of helplessness, guilt, and emotional exhaustion.
- Euthanasia decisions driven by financial hardship rather than medical necessity place a heavy emotional burden on veterinary professionals.
- The cumulative impact of compassion fatigue and moral distress contributes to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and mental health struggles.

Financial and Socioeconomic Pressures

- Rising operational costs combined with increasing cost-of-living pressures make it harder for veterinary businesses to remain financially sustainable.
- Pet owners struggling to afford care often create heightened tensions, unrealistic expectations, and emotional distress for both veterinarians and clients.
- The gap between necessary care and what clients can afford leaves veterinarians in difficult positions, where they must balance professional ethics with financial realities.

Workload and Industry Expectations

- Staff shortages and rising demand lead to long hours, high caseloads, and chronic workplace stress.
- Industry-wide expectations often normalise excessive workloads and unpaid hours, intensifying stress and eroding work-life balance. Chronic staff shortages and increasing demand force veterinarians to work long hours under high-pressure conditions.

Public Perception and Client Behaviour

- Misinformation and unrealistic client expectations about the cost of veterinary care create tension and resentment toward veterinary teams.
- Veterinarians are increasingly subjected to verbal abuse and online harassment which further impacts mental health and wellbeing.
- There is a growing disconnect between the perceived affordability of veterinary care and the true costs of delivering veterinary services, leaving veterinarians vulnerable to public criticism and therefore emotional strain.



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Addressing these challenges requires interconnected support systems, sustainable financial models, and greater recognition of veterinarians' role in both animal welfare and human health and wellbeing.

The Cherished Pets Model as a Supportive Framework

Cherished Pets operates at the intersection of veterinary and social services, recognising that animal welfare is inherently linked to human health and wellbeing.

Our model provides:

- A social veterinary service that supports veterinarians by offering an alternative pathway for engaging with clients in financial or emotional distress. Instead of veterinarians absorbing the burden of difficult conversations about affordability and care options, veterinary social workers work alongside veterinary professionals to provide guidance, referrals, and solutions.
- An independent referral service for challenging cases, reducing stress on clinical teams by connecting clients with veterinary social workers and allied health professionals who specialise in addressing social and financial barriers to care.
- A volunteer-driven community support system that assists with pet care for individuals experiencing hardship, ensuring that pets remain healthy and with their owners which alleviates pressure on other animal welfare organisations and veterinary teams.
- Education and training for veterinary teams on psychosocial safety, communication strategies, understanding the impact of social issues on the human animal bond and animal welfare, and early intervention approaches for addressing complex client interactions.
- Addresses the three pillars of the Australian Veterinary Association's Thrive Program: Prevent, Protect, Promote.

How Social Veterinary Services Align with Inquiry Focus Areas

Veterinarian Retention and Workforce Support

A social veterinary services model provides structured support to address key challenges leading to veterinarians leaving the profession. By integrating Veterinary Social Work and social services, we create clear referral pathways for clients experiencing financial and emotional distress, allowing veterinarians to focus on clinical care of animals rather than crisis management. This reduces emotional fatigue and burnout, making veterinary work more sustainable.



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Workplace Culture and Safe Working Conditions

Veterinary professionals frequently navigate challenging interactions with distressed clients. Implementing structured support services, such as those modeled by Cherished Pets, ensures that veterinary teams have access to social workers and support staff who can mediate financial and emotional crises, fostering a safer and more sustainable work environment.

Suicide Prevention and Burnout Mitigation

Veterinary Social Work plays a crucial role in suicide prevention and mental health support within the profession. By equipping veterinary teams with training in social-hearted veterinary care and establishing clear referral pathways to independent support services, we create a proactive framework that helps identify and address mental health challenges before they escalate.

Economic Pressures and Cost-of-Living Impact on Veterinary Practice

The current cost-of-living crisis is exacerbating tensions within veterinary clinics, as pet owners struggle to afford care. Veterinary teams often absorb the emotional and financial strain of these interactions. A funded, independent social veterinary service and access to a veterinary bill assistance fund for eligible people (government supported) would serve as a bridge between veterinary care and social support, ensuring that pet owners receive guidance on financial assistance, pet insurance options, and community support resources.

The need for a government-supported veterinary financial assistance fund is urgent. Such a fund would provide essential relief for struggling pet owners, prevent unnecessary euthanasia and pet surrenders, and ease the burden on veterinary professionals, creating a more sustainable and compassionate system for both people and their pets, and the vet teams who support them.

Empowering Veterinary Nurses and Allied Professionals

Veterinary Social Work and social veterinary services complement the expertise of veterinary nurses by expanding the support network within clinical settings. By integrating social services into veterinary practice, clinics can alleviate some of the pressure on veterinarians, fostering a more sustainable model of care.

This also creates pathways for professional development in the globally emerging field of Veterinary Social Work and social veterinary services, which is gaining increasing interest. By equipping veterinary teams with additional skills and resources, this model enhances both workplace sustainability and the overall wellbeing of veterinary professionals.



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Recommendations

1. Government Investment in Social Veterinary Services

- a. Provide sustainable funding for veterinary social work programs to establish formal referral pathways for pet owners experiencing financial or emotional distress.
- b. Support training and workforce development to equip veterinary teams with the skills needed to navigate the increasing psychosocial challenges in clinical practice.

2. Formal Recognition of Social Veterinary Work in National Mental Health Strategies

- a. Embed social veterinary services within government-funded mental health initiatives to improve veterinarian wellbeing and client support.
- b. Recognise Veterinary Social Workers as essential professionals within veterinary teams, ensuring dedicated funding for in-clinic social work roles.

3. Expansion of Preventative and Upstream Mental Health Support

- a. Align with the AVA's Thrive program pillars: Prevent, Protect, Promote, ensuring systemic and preventative mental health support for veterinary professionals.
- b. Invest in workplace mental health and wellbeing strategies that address the unique psychosocial risks faced by veterinarians, including moral distress, burnout, and financial stress.

4. Strengthening Collaboration Between Veterinary and Social Services

- a. Develop cross-sector partnerships between veterinary professionals, mental health services, and community organisations to create a holistic, government-supported safety net for veterinarians and pet owners.
- b. Implement government-backed financial assistance and support initiatives that bridge human and animal welfare, recognising the impact of the human-animal bond on individual and community wellbeing.

Conclusion

Veterinary professionals play a vital role in society, yet their wellbeing is often overlooked. The Cherished Pets model of social veterinary services provides an innovative, evidence-based solution to alleviate many of the pressures faced by veterinarians.

By integrating veterinary and social services, this model not only supports veterinary teams but also strengthens community-based pet support and offers a pathway to improving mental health outcomes for veterinarians while enhancing animal welfare and human wellbeing. In 2023, our impact evaluation demonstrated over \$4 million in social return on



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investment, reinforcing the effectiveness of a collaborative, preventative approach. We are happy to share our Impact Report with anyone interested in learning more about the social value and outcomes of our services. Please email us at foundation@cherishedpetcare.com.au to request a copy.

By recognising and supporting this model, there is an opportunity to drive meaningful, systemic change, ensuring a more sustainable and resilient veterinary profession. We welcome the opportunity to discuss these recommendations further and provide any additional information as required.

Sincerely,

Alicia Kennedy

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Veterinarian, Founder of Cherished Pets

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