

Review Report of the Veterinary Practice Act 2018

**Prepared in accordance with the requirements of Section 148 of the
*Veterinary Practice Review 2018***

Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate

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Executive Summary

Veterinary care plays a crucial role in maintaining the health and well-being of pets and livestock. Veterinary professionals prevent, diagnose, and treat injuries and illnesses across various animal species. Their services encompass routine health examinations, vaccinations, surgical procedures, dental care, and emergency medical treatment.

To ensure quality veterinary services, the ACT Government introduced the [Veterinary Practice Act 2018](#) (the Act) and the [Veterinary Practice Regulation 2018](#) (the Regulation).

This legislation regulates the provision of veterinary care. The object of the Act is to regulate the provision of veterinary services to ensure:

- the provision of veterinary services is focused on the welfare and protection of animals;
- veterinary practitioners provide veterinary services professionally and competently;
- premises at which veterinary services are provided are of an acceptable standard;
- veterinary services provided in the ACT comply with standards that:
 - are acceptable to the community; and
 - meet national and international trade requirements;
- consumers of veterinary services are well informed about the competencies required of veterinary practitioners; and
- public health is protected.

The Act comprises the Regulation and a number of instruments relating to veterinary practitioner codes of conduct, fees and statutory appointments.

Beyond regulation, the ACT Government recognises that there are a range of other critical factors affecting veterinary services. These include broader issues within the profession, such as the mental health and well-being of veterinary staff, the work of veterinary nurses and technicians and the need for training and support within the industry. Additionally, a range of services are provided to support veterinary practice in the ACT. These initiatives focus on respite care for animals, subsidised care, and pet-crisis support. The goal of all this

work is to ensure that all Canberrans and their pets and livestock have access to top-quality healthcare.

Review Terms of Reference

This report has been prepared in accordance with section 148 of the Act which requires the Minister for City Services, as the responsible Minister under the Act, to review the operation of the Act as soon as practicable after the end of its 5th year of operation.

The Minister is required to present the findings of the review to the ACT Legislative Assembly within 6 months after the day the review is started. The review commenced in May 2024.

The consultation process looked at:

- the effectiveness of the Act at meeting its legislated objects relating to the provision of veterinary services in the ACT;
- significant barriers to meeting the legislated objects, such as unintended consequences and/or other areas that require updating; and
- areas of the Act that need amendment/modification.

The Government has taken the opportunity to complement the statutory review with a broader consideration of issues that may be impacting the delivery of veterinary service in the ACT. This includes topics such as the regulation of the broader veterinary profession, mental health and wellbeing of veterinary staff and training, mentoring and other forms of support; and issues that intersect with the veterinary profession like respite care for animals, social support models and/or pet-crisis support for access to urgent health care.

Consultation

To develop this review report, a community consultation process. This included:

- a discussion paper, with a series of targeted discussion questions, was published on the ACT Government's YourSay platform to assist the public in providing feedback;
- communications were sent to key stakeholders, including all ACT registered practitioners and registered premises advising of the review and inviting feedback; and

- meetings were arranged with key stakeholders, including the ACT Veterinary Practitioners Board, Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, RSPCA ACT and the ACT Human Rights Commission.

The public consultation process was conducted from 22 May 2024 to 2 July 2024. Key stakeholders and the broader Canberra community were invited to provide input into the review via the YourSay website.

Overview of findings

Through the consultation process there was an acknowledgement that the Act was meeting its objectives and many positive outcomes were being achieved. Despite this, there were a number of submissions that indicated that some faced challenges in engaging with the legislation and made recommendations for its improvement.

Through the consultation process the review heard that a number of positive outcomes had been achieved in the areas of:

- animal welfare and protection;
- registration control;
- efficient investigation and resolution of complaints;
- ability to work with veterinarians not meeting professional standards;
- balancing caution and penalties; and
- collaboration and community representation.

The review heard that users and decisions makers under the Act and associated regulation faced several challenges in the areas of:

- mediation and investigation;
- professional conduct and misconduct;
- board and registration;
- offences and penalties;
- veterinary responsibility and regulation; and
- updates and scrutiny.

The review also heard that the broader veterinary sector faced several challenges in the areas of:

- workforce shortages and support;
- veterinary nurse retention;
- self-care and resources; and
- telemedicine policy and code of practice.

The review heard a range of recommendations to build on the positive outcomes under the legislation and address challenges arising from engaging with the legislation. These were in the areas of:

- realigning the objects of the legislation in line with contemporary principles, such as those issued by the Australian Veterinarian Association;
- improving processes surrounding scrutiny for changing Restricted and Unrestricted Acts of veterinary science;
- clarifying registration requirements and processes for veterinary practitioners and premises;
- honing the requirements and processes for handling complaints and investigations;
- clarifying board functions and resolving board processes, including quorum conflicts of interest; and
- clarifying police powers and consent to entry requirements.

The review also heard a range of ideas for better supporting veterinary practice, including:

- addressing veterinary industry workforce shortage through an integrated holistic approach;
- considering a regulatory scheme for veterinary nurses;
- finding ways to better support veterinary work-life balance, well-being and self care;
- supporting greater opportunities for veterinary professional development such as more training sessions and workshops;

- establishing and expanding subsidised or low-cost veterinary care and awareness initiatives for vulnerable individuals and their pets;
- supporting existing veterinary clinics and charity organisations or that have a proven track record of providing access to urgent care and respite services or establish new initiatives to fill any gaps; and
- raising community awareness about the role of veterinarians, regulations, standards and appropriate behaviour in interactions with vets.

Next Steps

Section 148 of the Act requires that the Minister for City Services present a review report to the ACT Legislative Assembly. The ACT Government will consider the findings of the report and the consultation process and determine whether any changes need to be made to the legislation.

Introduction

Background

Australia boasts one of the highest rates of pet ownership globally, with approximately 69 percent of households including pet companions. Dogs are the most common pets, making up 48 percent of the total, followed by cats at 33 percent. They provide companionship and comfort for many people.

Veterinarians play a key role in animal, human and community wellbeing by maintaining the health and wellbeing of our pets and livestock. In Australia, most veterinarians work in major cities in a small animal practice with around 6 percent working with larger animals.

This trend is reflected in Canberra which is the home to 46 veterinary premises and 321 registered veterinary practitioners. Veterinarians are specialised in different aspects of animal care, ranging from surgical procedures and dentistry to pharmacology and animal behaviour. They are responsible for preventing, diagnosing and treating injuries and illnesses across a range of animal species and provide services that include routine health examinations, vaccinations, surgical procedures, dental care and emergency medical treatment.

The ACT Government believes that veterinary practitioners should be supported to deliver quality services to the ACT and that all Canberrans, and their pets, should have access to the best health care possible. This is why the Government introduced the *Veterinary Practice Act 2018* (the Act) to regulate the provision of veterinary services. In accordance with legislative requirements, the ACT Government is now reviewing the first five years of the Act's operation and has undertaken a consultation review to inform this Report.

The ACT Government also recognises that a range of other issues impact on the delivery of veterinary services in the ACT and across Australia. The issues are being considered by other jurisdictions including through the New South Wales Veterinary Workforce Shortage Inquiry. These issues relate to the veterinary profession, including the regulation of the broader veterinary profession such as veterinary nurses and technicians, mental health and wellbeing of veterinary staff and training, mentoring and support for veterinary staff. They also include issues relating to key organisations that support and intersect with the

veterinary profession, including improving respite care for animals, supporting social support models, such as mobile veterinary services and subsidised veterinary care, desexing, boarding and sustenance, and pet-crisis support for access to urgent health care.

Review Terms of Reference

This report has been prepared to accordance with section 148 of the Act. Section 148 requires the Minister for City Services, as the responsible Minister under the Act, to review the operation of the Act as soon as practicable after the end of its 5th year of operation.

The Minister is required to present the findings of the review to the Legislative Assembly within 6 months after the day the review is started.

The review commenced in May 2024.

The review included a public consultation process from 22 May to 2 July and targeted engagement with a range of key organisations, including the ACT Veterinary Practitioners Board, Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council and RSPCA ACT.

The consultation process asked key stakeholders about:

- the effectiveness of the Act at meeting its legislated objects relating to the provision of veterinary services in the ACT;
- significant barriers to meeting the legislated objects, such as unintended consequences and/or other areas that require updating; and
- areas of the Act that need amendment/modification.

The Government has taken the opportunity to complement this process with a broader consideration of issues that may be impacting the delivery of veterinary service in the ACT.

This includes topics such as the regulation of the broader veterinary profession; mental health and wellbeing of veterinary staff and training; mentoring and other forms of support; and issues that intersect with the veterinary profession like respite care for animals, social support models and/or pet-crisis support for access to urgent health care.

Veterinary Practice Act 2018

The Act commenced in December 2018 and replaced the previous *Veterinary Surgeons Act 2015*. It is based on the NSW *Veterinary Practitioners Act 2003* and the NSW *Veterinary Practitioners Regulation 2013*.

The development of the legislation followed an extensive review of the ACT veterinary legislation, alternative models and the outcomes of consultation with the veterinary profession and the community. This resulted in legislation that was clearer in its approach to regulating and registering the profession.

The object of the Act is to regulate the provision of veterinary services to ensure:

- the provision of veterinary services is focused on the welfare and protection of animals;
- veterinary practitioners provide veterinary services professionally and competently;
- premises at which veterinary services are provided are of an acceptable standard;
- veterinary services provided in the ACT comply with standards that:
 - are acceptable to the community; and
 - meet national and international trade requirements;
- consumers of veterinary services are well informed about the competencies required of veterinary practitioners; and
- public health is protected.

The Act comprises the *Veterinary Practice Regulation 2018* (the Regulation) and a number of instruments relating to veterinary practitioner codes of conduct, fees as well as the statutory appointments of the Registrar, Assistant Registrar, Inspectors and Veterinary Practitioners Board members.

Methodology

To develop this review report, a community consultation process was undertaken to inform any future legislative change required. This included:

- a discussion paper, with a series of targeted discussion questions, was published on the ACT Government's YourSay platform to assist the public in providing feedback;

- communications were sent to key stakeholders, including all ACT registered practitioners and registered premises advising of the review and inviting feedback; and
- meetings were arranged with key stakeholders, including the ACT Veterinary Practitioners Board, Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, RSPCA ACT and the ACT Human Rights Commission.

The public consultation process was conducted from 22 May 2024 to 2 July 2024. Key stakeholders and the broader Canberra community were invited to provide input into the review via the YourSay website.

A What We Heard Report was prepared for the YourSay Public Consultation to communicate high level themes and is attached to this report.

Findings

Has the Act effectively supported the objects?

The consultation process found that the Act's objects are being achieved. They have supported the achievement of a range of positive outcomes relating to the effective provision of veterinary services in the ACT. These outcomes are set out below.

Veterinarian services that are focussed on the welfare and protection of animals

The Act has effectively supported the welfare and protection of animals through enabling the ACT Veterinary Practitioners Board (Vet Board) to provide general advice to consumers of veterinary services in relation to the ethics and standards of professional competence, as well as set standards for practice.

There was considerable support for the [Veterinary Practice Veterinary Practitioner Code of Professional Conduct 2018](#) (Professional Conduct Code). This code was created under the Act and sets out the standards of conduct for veterinary practitioners carrying out the practice of veterinary science. It requires that the welfare of animals must be considered by veterinary practitioners when practising veterinary science.

The review heard that the Act clearly articulates the grounds on which any person may make a complaint about a veterinary practitioner. Section 52 of the Act has supported the

delivery of the positive outcomes set out below by enabling the Vet Board to take immediate action in relation to a registered veterinary practitioner if they have grounds to reasonably believe the practitioner poses a serious risk to people and animals or that it is necessary to take immediate action to protect public health or the safety of animals.

The Regulation also sets out the restricted acts of veterinary science (Restricted Acts) that can only be provided by a qualified registered veterinary practitioner, while the Act sets out the unrestricted acts of veterinary science (Unrestricted Acts) that may be performed by veterinary staff. Consequently, the legislation effectively provides a framework to ensure veterinarian services are delivered by appropriately qualified staff to ensure the welfare and protection of animals.

Veterinary practitioners provide veterinary services professionally and competently

The Act has effectively supported the professional and competent provision of veterinary services by providing a clear and thorough process for registering and deregistering veterinary practitioners and premises.

The review heard that there was considerable support for Part 3 of the Act which sets out the registration process for veterinary practitioners and Part 4 which recognises veterinary practitioners from other jurisdictions. Part 5 was also acknowledged as supporting the positive outcomes set out below by setting out a process for dealing with complaints and allowing the Vet Board to take immediate action where a practitioner's practice does not meet professional or community expectations. This support extends to Part 6 which sets out similar provisions relating to veterinary premises.

Veterinary premises are of an acceptable standard

The Act has effectively supported veterinary premises meeting acceptable community, national and international standards through Part 6. There was considerable support for the creation and operation of the [Veterinary Practice Veterinary Premises Standards 2018](#) (Premises Standards). The standard sets out the minimum requirements that veterinary premises need to satisfy in order to meet the Vet Board's standards at the time of approval.

The review also found that there was general support for the registration process for veterinary premises set out in Division 6.2 and for the offences set out in Division 6.5 for inappropriate practices carried out at registered veterinary premises.

Veterinary services provided in the ACT comply with standards

As mentioned the Act has effectively enabled the Vet Board to publish the Professional Conduct Code and the Premises Standards. It also sets out appropriate standards of practice through the Restricted and Unrestricted acts of veterinary science. The consensus was that these codes and standards have contributed to the delivery of the positive outcomes set out below.

Consumers of veterinary services are well informed about the competencies required of veterinary practitioners

The Act has improved the awareness of the general public about the competencies required of veterinary practitioners. As mentioned above, the Act, through section 104, has enabled the Vet Board to publish a Professional Conduct Code. This code has been used to communicate the Vet Board's expectations about the competencies required for veterinary practitioners to consumers of veterinary services and the public.

There was support for the way that the Act clearly articulates to consumers of veterinary services through Part 5 the grounds on which any person may make a complaint about a veterinary practitioner if they believe that the practitioner has not demonstrated these competencies.

Veterinary services protect public health

The Act has supported veterinary services that protect public health through the mechanisms discussed above. In particular, the Vet Board's ability to take immediate action under section 52 was identified as an effective way to protect both animal and public health. The section provides that if the Vet Board has grounds to reasonably believe that the practitioner poses a serious risk to people and animals they may take immediate action set out in the Act to protect public health or the safety of animals.

The Act's creation of two categories of professional misconduct and unsatisfactory professional conduct was another area where the Act has produced positive outcomes. The category of unsatisfactory professional conduct gives the Vet Board the option to support the veterinarian to better protect public health through training or mentoring rather than requiring an application for an occupational discipline order to suspend or cancel a veterinary practitioner's registration.

There was also support for the process established under the Act in section 70 relating to the joint consideration of a complaint or occupational discipline matter by the Vet Board and the Human Rights Commission.

While the review heard that the majority of submissions supported the Act meeting its objects, a number of challenges were identified and recommendations offered to improve its performance. These are discussed later in this report.

What outcomes have been achieved under the Act?

The review heard that a number of positive outcomes had been achieved under the Act and associated regulation.

Animal Welfare and Protection

The legislation encourages high professional standards relating to veterinarian practice. The review heard that the clear focus on animal welfare and safeguarding animals has resulted in strong animal welfare outcomes.

Registration Control

The review heard that the registration of veterinarians and premises and the regulation of Restricted Acts of veterinary science has been effective in ensuring that the legislation has contributed to the delivery of intended outcomes consistent with the objects of the Act. This has underscored the regulatory effectiveness of the legislation.

Efficient Investigation and Resolution of Complaints

The legislation enables efficient investigation and resolution of complaints. Complaints are able to be investigated promptly and without excessive formality. When a complaint arises, the Vet Board can swiftly investigate and resolve it, ensuring fairness and transparency.

Ability to Work with Veterinarians not Meeting Professional Standards

The Vet Board's authority to make findings related to unsatisfactory conduct and professional misconduct underscores the importance of accountability within the profession. Combined with the ability to take immediate action, the legislation also provides the Vet Board with various options to work with veterinarians who are not meeting standards to improve their practice by issuing conditions on practice, such as supervision,

mentoring or other specific requirements. This reflects a commitment to enhancing professional standards through the provision of constructive support and improvement pathways.

Balancing Caution and Penalties

The legislation provides the Vet Board with a good balance of options to take upon conclusion of an investigation where disciplinary action was the outcome. The balance between giving a caution with any remedial action compared to pursuing more serious actions under the legislation is appropriate.

Collaboration and Community Representation

The legislation encourages collaboration with diverse community and human rights stakeholders. The review heard that the involvement of community representatives, joint consideration with the Human Rights Commission, and reciprocal recognition from other jurisdictions has encouraged collaboration and diverse perspectives. This has improved the quality of outcomes under the Act.

What challenges exist that interfere with the effective operation of the Act?

The consultation heard that users and decision makers under the *Veterinary Practice Act 2018* and associated regulation faced a number of challenges.

Mediation and Investigation

The legislation does not provide a formal means to undertake mediation before investigation, especially when there are differences of opinion between the Vet Board and the Human Rights Commission over disciplinary actions to be undertaken.

Furthermore, a strength of the legislation is that it allows the Vet Board to undertake immediate action in relation to issues of veterinary practice, however, there is a lack of legislative clarity concerning how long the immediate action can condition and when conditions may be applied.

Professional Conduct and Misconduct

The legislation provides that the Vet Board may make findings of unsatisfactory professional conduct and professional misconduct, however, it does not clearly articulate the

relationship between unsatisfactory professional conduct and professional misconduct. Furthermore, this part of the legislation does not clearly articulate the meaning of a “veterinary practitioner” in the context of disciplinary actions.

Board and Registration

The legislation does not clearly articulate the core skillset of the Vet Board Chairperson. There was discussion around what Ministerial consultation should be required for all potential Vet Board members, including community representatives. The legislation also does not articulate a process for addressing conflicts of interest within the Vet Board where a quorum may be conflicted.

Offences and Penalties

The offences and penalties are generally satisfactory, however, some offences may need updating based on changes to associated legislation and agreements, such as that relating to mutual recognition of veterinary practitioners from other jurisdictions. Other penalties, such as that relating to unsatisfactory professional conduct may be too low so as not to provide sufficient deterrent.

Veterinary Responsibility and Regulation

The onus for human rights and work safety compliance is on employers rather than employees. It was raised that there is a lack of comparable regulatory mechanisms for non-veterinary staff available in the current legislation to ensure standards and responsibilities are met, but also to empower and professionalise other veterinary staff, such as veterinary nurses. Veterinary nurses and technicians are currently unregulated and cannot perform Restricted Acts of veterinary science.

Updates and Scrutiny

The legislation restricts certain actions to registered veterinary practitioners. A number of submissions identified that this introduced challenges, such as sedation in the field of research, and exacerbated challenges, such as the time taken to attend to new arrivals in shelters. A broader concern was raised over the differential requirements associated with adding items to or removing items from the Restricted Acts schedule is in the Regulation

compared with the Unrestricted Acts schedule. This results in both schedules facing different levels of scrutiny.

The review also heard that the broader veterinary sector faced a number of challenges.

Workforce

There is a general shortage of veterinarians and nurses globally and this shortage is a major source of poor mental health and well-being within the industry. Furthermore, the transient population and high accommodation costs in the ACT pose challenges for attracting and retaining veterinary professionals. Competition from major employers, such as the public sector, for childcare places adds to the complexity.

Veterinary Nurse Retention

Veterinary nurses face challenges in the industry. These relate to underutilisation, lack of career progression, and job satisfaction.

Self-Care and Resources

There is a lack of awareness and resources for veterinarian self-care, which may be impacting overall well-being within the industry.

Telemedicine and Code of Practice

Telemedicine is a growing avenue for providing veterinary consultations. The current telemedicine policy under legislation is not suitable for the needs of veterinary practice. There are potential inconsistencies between the legislation and new codes of practice relating to telemedicine that have the potential to cause confusion for veterinary practitioners.

What legislative recommendations have been proposed to improve the operation of the Act?

Through consultation a range of initiatives were suggested to build on the positive outcomes under the legislation and address the challenges identified above. These need to be further considered, and some are already being acted on.

Objects of the Act

While the majority of feedback supported the current objects of the Act, there were some calls to modify the Objects of the Act to align with the Australian Veterinarian Association's *Recommended key principles for veterinary practice acts in Australia*¹, emphasising animal welfare, public health, safety, consumer confidence, and international trade requirements.

The importance of the Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship was stressed by many stakeholders. It was proposed that the relationship could be included in the legislation, either in the Objects of the Act, Section 10 ('Carrying out restricted act of veterinary science without authority') or Code of Conduct. Its inclusion would emphasise the importance of the relationship as the basis for interaction among veterinarians, their clients, and their patients and recognise its importance to the health of an animal.

Restricted and Unrestricted Acts in Veterinary Practice

Feedback was received that the Restricted and Unrestricted Acts should be subject to the same scrutiny. Consideration could be given to placing both schedules in either the legislation or the subordinate legislation and to expanding consultation on proposed amendments to such acts in the Regulation beyond declared bodies to qualified and affected veterinary practitioners in the ACT.

Restricted Acts could also be updated to allow carve outs to better meet peculiar shelter and/or research needs and requirements. Current practices within these areas could be reviewed to ensure that institutions working in these areas are not inadvertently contravening these restrictions and consider awareness raising approaches to reduce potential contraventions in the future.

There were mixed recommendations relating to expanding Restricted Acts to veterinary nurses. Suggestions were put forward that they should remain as they currently are unless there are specific reasons related to mental health challenges.

Unrestricted Acts could be evaluated to determine whether their scope is appropriate, against the need to maintain animal health, welfare, and public health. In the case of better meeting the needs of registered veterinary nurses working in shelters, it was proposed

¹ ['Recommended key principles for veterinary practice acts in Australia'](#), Australian Veterinarian Association, April 2017.

adding a 'shelter medicine' clause to the list of Unrestricted Acts of veterinary science and allowing these registered veterinary nurses to perform cat castrations under the supervision of a veterinarian. This would assist in addressing any shortages of veterinarians and contribute to managing pet overpopulation. It would also require proper training and compliance with the protocol.

Registration of Veterinary Practitioners and Premises

The provisions relating to registration of veterinary practitioners could be amended to better clarify registration requirements. Section 39 could clarify that only registered veterinary practitioners can practice. Section 43 could clarify impairments that may affect fitness to practice Restricted Acts.

The registration process could be improved by providing that a person cannot hold specialist registration if they are eligible for general registration as a veterinary practitioner. However, if they already hold general registration, they remain eligible.

Several parts of the legislation need to be updated to reflect current government policies, such as the Vet Board not being able to remove a veterinary practitioner from the register solely because their principal place of residence is not in the ACT. Other parts would benefit from simplifying the terminology used to aid usability, such as the wording around 'deemed registration'.

The provisions relating to the registration of veterinary premises could be amended to better reflect current premises and the emergence of new forms of premises, and to ensure a holistic approach to regulating veterinary practices, rather than just practitioners. References to 'veterinary premises standards' could be amended to specify requirements for different types of premises.

Section 71 could better reflect current premises and associated risks by removing reference to 'mobile veterinary hospital' in section 71. A 'house call practice' category could be added to section 71(2) for premises registration. The legislation or code relating to premises could be amended to ensure consistent display of Certificates of Premises Registration under section 89.

Complaints and Investigations

Feedback identified that amendments could be made to clarify the requirements concerning complaint and the conduct of investigations arising from such complaints. Section 44 could be amended to better address the consequences of non-veterinary practitioners posing as vets. Section 46 could better clarify complaint timelines and facilitated more efficient resolution of complaints processes by considering the modification of the 'just and fair' criterion. A new provision could be added in the spirit of greater cooperation between jurisdictions for notifying other jurisdictions about conditions on a veterinary registration.

In relation to professional conduct matters consideration could be given to reviewing sections 40 and 41 and considering the circumstances for escalation of investigation findings from unsatisfactory professional conduct to professional misconduct. A similar consideration could be made to provide greater clarity in section 51 on how long immediate action can continue and/or be extended and when conditions may be applied. Specific timeframes for responses could be added to section 52, representation requirements during investigations could be clarified in section 57 and the range of disciplinary actions could be better specified in section 61. There was interest in increasing penalties for unsatisfactory professional conduct to act as a better deterrent and strengthening the capacity to address misleading advertising by non-veterinarians.

In relation to Professional Conduct Code, section 67 could be amended to refer to contraventions of the code. The section could also be amended to specify reporting requirements. Section 68 could be amended to clarify interim suspension of registration or it could be removed altogether.

The complaints process can place considerable resources costs on veterinarians. Consideration could be given to providing resources and support to veterinarians during the complaints process, streamlining the investigation process by including time limits, addressing delays in investigating complaints, implementing complaint thresholds to reduce unnecessary investigations and introducing an ombudsman or similar role to pre-screen complaints.

Board Functions and Processes

The functions and processes of the Vet Board could be better communicated to veterinary practitioners and other users of the legislation by reordering its preferences to stress an education-first approach.

The legislation could also provide more information on the Vet Board Chairperson's skillset, including key functions undertaken. Clarity could be provided around quorum requirements for Vet Board meeting by articulating what should happen when the quorum is affected by a conflict of interest. A provision could be added that allows delegation in cases of conflict. Clarity could also be sought as to whether the Vet Board is required by other legislation to hold an annual general meeting rather than more ad-hoc meetings as the needs arises.

Feedback received pointed to various parts of the legislation that should be clarified, updated and simplified, such as providing greater clarity around board allowances and information accessibility and referencing requirements under *the Financial Management Act 1996* instead of reproducing disclosure of interests' requirements.

Amendments to Police Powers and Consent to Entry

Sections 112 and 115 could provide greater clarity. A reference could be made to 'under the direction of the Vet Board, without limiting the powers of police officers' when reference is made to the power of an inspector. Section 114 which covers 'consent to entry' could better clarify what happens if the occupier does not consent, as set out in section 114(2) (with reference to section 114(4)). Section 115 could be amended to include computers and other electronic records, copies, and abstracts if appropriate, or provide an illustrative example.

Veterinary Nurses

Recommendations were received in support of and against the regulation of veterinary nurses within this legislation or other legislation. Those submissions in support of some form of regulation suggested that the existing regulation could be extended to cover veterinary nurses with appropriate qualifications, consideration could be given to introducing a new regulation relating to veterinary nurses separate from the one for veterinary practitioners but without deregulating veterinary acts, and a provision could be added for reviewing the regulation if it was introduced after 3 years of its operation. The

title of 'Veterinary Nurse' would need to be clearly defined and restricted only to staff with approved qualifications.

The legislation could mandate registration and continuing professional development requirements for veterinary nurses and certification pathways could be established for veterinary nurses to specialise in areas like emergency/critical care, dentistry and surgical nursing. A code of conduct and fitness-to-practice requirements could be established for registered veterinary nurses with clear guidelines on appropriate tasks that can be delegated to veterinary nurses based on their training and competency levels. The level of veterinary supervision required for all veterinary nursing tasks would need to be articulated with superintendent veterinarians/practice owners being held accountable for improper delegation of tasks.

Any regulatory scheme for veterinary nurses could be supported with career development and recognition pathways to provide more education and training opportunities, including micro-credentials and supportive return-to-work programs. Cooperative linkages between vocational education and training sectors and higher education could be encouraged with remuneration in the Animal Care and Veterinary Services Award linked to the Australian Qualifications Framework and levels of expertise.

A Code of Conduct for Unregistered Providers could be created to ensure safe and ethical animal care, proper qualifications, communication with veterinarians, and adherence to professional conduct standards during procedures. Alternatively, the existing code of conduct relating to registered veterinary practitioners could be used to achieve similar outcomes. The code could be amended to include a definition of the 'person responsible for the care of an animal' in relation to informed consent. It could be amended to set minimum quality standards for veterinary nurses assisting veterinarians. This includes recording procedures, identifying the responsible individuals, and specifying supervising veterinarians.

The regulation of veterinary nurses already successfully occurs in NSW and there is a national voluntary scheme. This subject was also a focus of the recent NSW Inquiry into Veterinary Shortages.

Other

Consideration could be given to reviewing references to telemedicine in the legislation. This could include addressing ambiguities in wording related to telemedicine and using the correct term 'Prescription medicine only (Schedule 4)'.

What other recommendations have been made?

The review also heard a range of ideas for better supporting veterinary practice that are not legislative or outside the scope of the Act.

Workforce Shortages and Support

Initiatives to address industry workforce shortages were suggested. These included prioritising childcare placements for veterinarians and nurses to address availability challenges. To attract new veterinarians to the industry or to increase longevity in the industry, the ACT Government can continue to advocate for increased working visas and migration of qualified veterinarians and support practice owners with paperwork, extend family migration assistance to include extended family members of migrant veterinarians in migration plans to assist with childcare, and implement tax incentives for experienced veterinarians aged 55 and over to remain in practice and attract those from the public service.

Other initiatives could provide better support for veterinary professionals. These include supporting existing initiatives like the Australian Veterinary Association's Graduate Mentoring Program and Thrive Wellness Initiative, assisting locum veterinarians with travel and accommodation costs, providing rent assistance to encourage vet nurses to stay or move to the ACT, and offering incentives for final-year veterinary students to relocate to Canberra on a 'bonded placement' basis.

Work-Life Balance, Well-Being and Self Care

Several suggestions were put forward to improve the work-life balance and wellbeing of veterinary practitioners. Consideration could be given to advocate for better work-life balance policies, reasonable working hours, and employee assistance programs within veterinary practices; establish minimum downtime of 12 hours between shifts and maximum shift lengths; require mandatory overtime pay for exceeding shift times; offer

training on managing client interactions, communication skills, and dealing with emotional challenges of the job; and provide access to confidential counselling services and mental health resources tailored for veterinary professionals.

Potential initiatives to cover veterinarian self-care were proposed. These include the development of practical resources and awareness raising related to self-care; referencing the importance of self-care and various avenues of support in the Veterinary Practitioners Code of Professional Conduct; and acknowledging the Jobs Demands Resources Model of Burnout, where stress is highest when demands are high and resources are limited.

Professional Development and Support

Several suggestions were put forward to support veterinary well-being and professional growth, including through professional development, for example restructuring vet CPD requirements, emphasising goals and reflecting on learning activities (using New Zealand's CPD requirements as a guide); developing mentorship programs pairing new graduates with experienced veterinarians; creating non-punitive health programs that allow veterinarians to self-report mental health issues and obtain appropriate support; providing financial support for veterinary medicine students to undertake practical work placements in the ACT; encouraging early career veterinarians to work in the ACT by offering educational fee relief; and expanding the scope of the ACT Government's 'Respect in the Workplace' campaign to address verbal and physical assault of veterinary care teams.

Subsidised or Low-Cost Veterinary Care

Many suggestions for subsidised or low-cost veterinary care were put forward. These include establishing financial assistance schemes or emergency relief funds for pet owners; expanding existing programs to cover essential veterinary care costs or pet food for low-income households and funding temporary respite care options for pets owned by vulnerable individuals. They also include initiatives to support access and awareness such as maintaining a comprehensive, easily accessible database of financial assistance resources; conducting public awareness campaigns to highlight available support options; collaborating with animal welfare groups to establish low-cost or free veterinary clinics; promoting pet crisis support services through government channels and creating a veterinary social work/case management team.

Urgent Care and Respite Services for Animals

Other suggestions encouraged the ACT Government to support existing veterinary clinics and charity organisations that have a proven track record of providing access to urgent care and respite services, annual or triennial 'preventative health care consultation' which would allow vulnerable Canberrans with a health care card to discuss responsible pet ownership and preventive healthcare with veterinarians and pet crisis support services would enhance access to urgent health care for pets.

Support could be provided to animal shelters and rescue organisations to expand respite care programs, offering temporary relief from pet care costs during emergencies or hardship. An emergency veterinary fund could cover urgent care costs for animals in crisis situations, especially those without known ownership. Facilities could be created to allow vulnerable residents, such as those fleeing domestic and family violence situations, to take their pets with them. The ACT Government could encourage partnerships with social services to integrate animal and human care support, benefiting both vulnerable populations and their pets. These initiatives could be supported by the establishment of a 24/7 veterinary hotline service can provide advice and assistance during emergencies.

Education and Awareness Raising

Initiatives to raise awareness about the role of veterinarians, regulations, standards, and financial investments were suggested. These could be supported by programs to educate the public about good practice animal care, appropriate behaviour in interactions with vets and the impact of their actions, and available resources during emergencies.

The Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate's website could also be improved to provide clearer information on: what constitutes veterinary misconduct for the information of practitioners and the public; penalties for making false claims against veterinary professionals; and the Board's role in supporting veterinary practitioners to mitigate below-standard practice and service deliver rather than penalise veterinarians.

Other

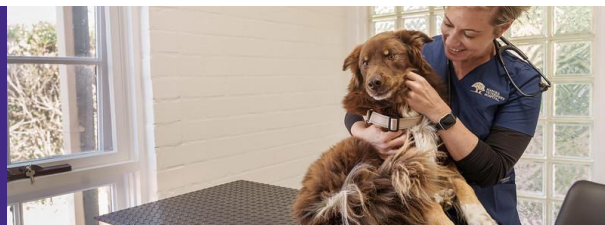
Other suggestions related to animal ownership standards and insurance. This may involve developing legal requirements and minimal standards for animal ownership, including veterinary care, and supporting and promoting affordable animal healthcare insurances.

The review also heard that some veterinarians were concerned about ACT Government decisions that hindered the effective delivery of services during COVID-19 lockdowns. There should be a consideration of the impact of some of these decisions and how future decisions during crises can better support practice.

Where to Next?

Section 148 of the Act requires that the Minister for City Services present a review report to the ACT Legislative Assembly. The ACT Government will consider the findings of the report and determine whether any changes need to be made to the legislation.

The What We Heard Report attached to this report will be published on the ACT Government's YourSay website.



Attachment: VETERINARY PRACTICE REVIEW

REPORT ON WHAT WE HEARD

The ACT Government undertook a review of veterinary practice in the ACT to identify areas for improvement. Key stakeholders and the community were invited to provide input to the review from 22 May 2024 to 2 July 2024.

The review included a statutory review of the *Veterinary Practice Act 2018* to ensure the Act is meeting its objectives and to identify possible areas for improvement in veterinary practice in the ACT more broadly.

The *Veterinary Practice Act 2018* regulates veterinary services within the ACT to ensure:

- vet services are focused on the welfare and protection of animals
- vet practitioners provide services professionally and competently
- consumers are well informed about the competencies required of veterinarians
- premises at which vet services are provided are of an acceptable standard
- vet services in the ACT meet community standards as well as national and international requirements
- public health is protected
- veterinary practitioners engage in ongoing professional development, education and training
- equitable access to veterinary care for all Canberrans
- effective processes are in place for handling complaints and disciplining practitioners who fail to meet the required standards.

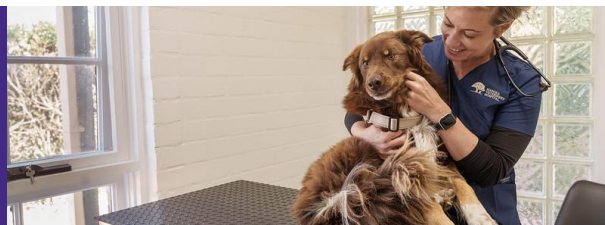
The review consulted on the suitability of the current rules and processes for registering vets and vet premises including how we recognise vets from other jurisdictions. It also sought views on the appropriateness of current complaints handling processes and disciplinary proceedings as well the lists of restricted and unrestricted acts of veterinary science to ensure they align with industry practice, training and codes of practice.

During the review of the *Veterinary Practice Act 2018* Canberrans and key stakeholders were also invited to consider a broad range of issues that impact veterinary practice in the ACT via an online discussion paper.

THE CONVERSATION

From 22 May 2024 to 2 July 2024, key stakeholders the broader Canberra community were invited to provide input into the review via the YourSay website.

We sent an email to 321 registered practitioners and 46 registered premises inviting feedback. The YourSay project page was viewed 430 times during the consultation period, with 365 visits from 205 visitors. The online Discussion Paper was downloaded 150 times and we received 66 submissions in total, with 16 of these providing specific input and feedback on the operation of the Act.



WHO WE ENGAGED

The ACT Government worked closely with key stakeholders including the ACT Veterinary Practitioners Board, Animal Welfare Advisory Committee and the RSPCA ACT to review the *Veterinary Practice Act 2018*.

The majority of the submissions were from veterinarians. There were also submissions from the Australian Veterinary Association, RSPCA ACT, Animal Medicines Australia, Pegasus Riding for the Disabled, Equine Training Australia and the Discrimination, Health Services, Disability and Community Safety Commissioner.

Key insights from stakeholders and the community

Continued support of the Act

1. Submissions highlight there is strong support for the *Veterinary Practice Act 2018* and *Veterinary Practice Regulation 2018* with acknowledgement the legislation is meeting its objectives.

Achievements in the protection of animal welfare and regulation of practitioners and premises

2. Submissions highlighted that many positive outcomes have been achieved in the areas of animal welfare protection, efficient registration of veterinary practitioners and premises, timely investigation and resolution of complaints and flexibility in working with veterinarians and premises to meet professional and community expectations.

Challenges with the operation of the Act and supporting the broader veterinary sector

3. Submissions also highlight challenges faced by users and decision makers around handling complaints, including in the areas of mediation and investigation and Veterinary Practitioners Board processes more broadly.
4. There is also acknowledgement the shortage of veterinarians and nurses is contributing to poor mental health and well-being within the sector.

Areas where the legislation could be improved

5. Greater clarity is needed around the registration process for veterinary practitioners and premises, including the complaints process.
6. Changes to the legislation, particularly restricted and unrestricted acts of veterinary science should be subject to greater scrutiny.

Calls for better support veterinarians, veterinary care and respite services

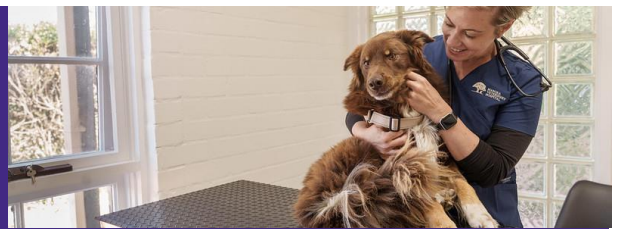
7. Suggestions were offered to address workforce shortages and well-being, including greater support for professional development and veterinarian self-care, and considering regulation of veterinary nurses.
8. Calls for more subsidised or low-cost veterinary services, urgent care and respite services for animals, including assistance schemes for essential veterinary care, emergency relief funds and temporary respite care options for pets owned by vulnerable Canberrans.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Feedback received during the review will help ensure the *Veterinary Practice Act 2018* is meeting its objectives and identify possible areas for improvement in veterinary practice in the ACT more broadly.

Feedback from this engagement has helped us understand next steps and if we need to make amendments. It will also be used to inform how we administer the legislation and better support the practice of veterinary practitioners and the community.

Project updates will continue to be provided via the [Veterinary Practice Review YourSay page](#).



You can also register to receive project updates by emailing communityengagement@act.gov.au

Key Timings

22 May 2024: Consultation opens

2 July 2024: Consultation closes

9 September 2024: What We Heard Report and Report on the Veterinary Practice Review released [**we are here**]

THANK YOU FOR YOUR FEEDBACK

367+

we sent an email to 367
stakeholders inviting
feedback

200+

a total of 205 people visited
the YourSay page during the
consultation period

150

the online Discussion Paper
was downloaded 150 times
in total

66

we received a total of 66
submissions from individuals
and organisations, 16 related
to the review of the Act