



The Time for Change is Now.

An insight into veterinary retention in rural practice in New Zealand, and the motivators for vets to stay or leave.

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Executive Summary

If you talk to any vet out there, I can almost guarantee it wasn't an offhand decision in their final year of high school that took them to vet school. The dream would have taken place years before. If you ask any vet, there will be a moment in their childhood; an experience or situation, that led them to say "I want to be a vet". They then had to work hard at school and university to realise their dream and for the majority this became their focus and passion.

How sad is it then, that after ten years of being a vet only 60% of people are reregistering? What has happened to the fire and the passion over these years?

I surveyed 205 veterinarians and they have provided me with a lot of information about the good side and the down side to rural practice in New Zealand. I themed these up into 6 main areas:

- 1) The job – the clients, the variety, after hours and job satisfaction
- 2) The practice – the people, the culture and flexibility
- 3) The lifestyle of a rural veterinarian
- 4) The production animal industry- the changing role of rural vets
- 5) Wellness – a look into stress, anxiety, mental health and wellbeing
- 6) Other things that help retain vets – the side comments that I couldn't ignore

It is up to all veterinary business owners and managers to ensure they do everything possible within their power to retain vets. Without young vets staying on and potentially they themselves investing in practices, what will the local veterinary practice look like in 30 years' time? A few big corporate clinics over the whole country? Lay companies doing the 'technician' work and the odd ambulatory vet patching up the problems?

The main findings from my research were that although we cannot expect anyone to stay in their initial job after graduating there are fundamental problems within the rural veterinary profession that do need attention to help with retention issues.

Practices need to have good people work for them, who are supportive and aware and enhance the culture of the practice. There is a need for good strong leaders that also show understanding. Employers need to be innovative, flexible and adaptable; and ensure the healthy well being of all their employees.

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I would like to acknowledge and thank those who helped me get my survey out there, especially Cal Irvine who, at the time was at the NZVA and saw the value in what I was trying to achieve and the importance of the subject. There were also a number of other colleagues that used the power of social media to help me out as well.

A huge thank you to all the vets out there who took the time to respond to my survey, and for being open, honest and generous with your time. You have provided me with a great amount of information not only to pull this project together, but also for inspiring me to take this knowledge into my personal business life.

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Introduction

This Kellogg Project looks into what the motivators are for vets to stay in clinical practice, in particular rural clinical practice, and what the reasons are as to why they are leaving.

I initially started thinking about this subject about six or seven years ago, after people that went through vet school with me started leaving rural practices, and some of them left the veterinary profession entirely. This caught me by surprise as I was totally happy in my role, with good prospects on the horizon. I really started to question how people have spent five years at university (and when you are young this can feel like an eternity), as well as having spent the best part of \$100,000 on university fees to get to where they were, and then have a complete change of direction.

While understanding that people change and life happens to everyone, I could understand that some people decided that being a clinical vet was not for them. A veterinary career is a lot more demanding than anyone ever prepares you for. After hours, client demands, accessibility, and obligation to help, sometimes it feels like you are on call 24/7. However, it was the people who had left rural practice for something else that I wanted to understand better. For you to understand why, you probably need to understand a bit about me.

I was born in central Auckland, one of five children. We grew up with our parents instilling in us the importance of education and the encouragement to do better than they did. While never feeling deprived, it must have been a financial struggle for my white-collar father to provide for mum and us five kids. We were given plenty of opportunities for after school hobbies and went to pretty good (high decile) Auckland schools. And their encouragement, support and selflessness paid off, with all five children completing tertiary education. Of my three brothers, one is a lawyer, one is a computer software designer and one is an automotive engineer. My youngest sister is a sworn police officer and myself, obviously a vet.

Since I was seven years old I had wanted to be a vet, albeit a vet that looked after cats and dogs. Having lived all my life in Auckland City, I went to vet school completely indifferent to the rural sector. It was not until getting into vet school that I really learnt the opportunities available to a vet, and that the potential was much greater than looking after cats and dogs - I even feel silly realising how naïve I was then mentioning that now! After leaving university I was lucky enough to get a genuine mixed animal job in a very supportive practice. My colleagues there built me up and provided unflinching support. The variety of work gave me a very solid grounding so I returned the favour to them by heading off to the UK after two years – probably as I was just starting to make them money. I spent two years in the UK, developing my skills and broadening my knowledge. While I was over there my old boss came and visited – all part of a greater (and eventually successful) plan to plant a fish hook in me and reel me back to my old job.

It was on my return to New Zealand that I noticed things had changed, not only in my work place but also with colleagues and friends from vet school. Personally, my practice had changed, while the job was at the same clinic it had changed with regard to more specialised roles. There were now equine vets, large animal vets and small animal vets. The segregation was brought about by personal vet preference, wishing to be more focused in a single area rather than being jack of all trades and master of none, and also by client expectation. Clients wanted someone who fully understood the dynamics of a race horse, who was passionate about their dairy business, and who had the skills to perform all kinds of surgery on their dog. My clinic responded with having vets more specialised within their area (without being specialists).

This was also the time when I began hearing that friends and colleagues I had gone through vet school with were leaving practice – 4-5 years after graduating. Some were having children and changing their focus but what struck me was the number that were no longer in rural practice. How had they not been loving it like I was? And more interestingly, some of these people had come across as the embodiment of rural practitioners during vet school: from a rural community, family members were vets, grew up on farms etc. Had these people had experiences that made them want to leave or was it a personal growth in ways they hadn't expected? Had they not had as much fun being part of a rural community, growing bonds and relationships to last a life time? With more millennials being employed there is also a huge shift in work-life balance and the mantra of working to live rather than living to work. Did this mindset play a part in their desire to leave?

Much more distressingly I was also becoming more aware of veterinarians who were at university with me committing suicide. We have known for some time that rural vets have a higher risk of suicide (Bartram and Baldwin, 2008) and poorer mental health and well-being than most professional groups (Fitch, 2006). The high achieving instinct of vets' compounds this – they are generally highly intelligent individuals who have perfectionist personalities and don't enjoy failing. As rural veterinarians we need to be acutely aware of this and be mindful of the mental health of all those around us. We need to remove the stigmatism of depression and be prepared to talk openly about it. How much was mental health paying a part in those leaving the profession?

In 2014 I saw the results of a 2011-12 veterinary work force survey results which covers off a number of aspects of veterinary work, but one area is retention rates. Table 1 shows that on average, 76% of New Zealand graduates are retained 2 years after first registering with the New Zealand Veterinary Council (NZVC). By the third year 70% are retained, 61% by year 4 and 62% by year five. It appears that retention rates level out to between 60 and 65% in years 5-10 after first graduation (NZVC, 2011-12).

TABLE 1. Counts and percentages of NZ veterinary graduates taking out an Annual Practising Certificate with the NZVC one to eight years following the year of first registration, 2002-2011. (source: NZVC, 2011-12).

Year first registered	Grad *	Year									
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
2002	73	97 (100%)	79 (81%)	78 (80%)	70 (72%)	58 (60%)	59 (61%)	58 (60%)	61 (63%)	60 (62%)	
2003	68	86 (100%)	79 (92%)	73 (85%)	69 (80%)	62 (72%)	63 (73%)	59 (69%)	54 (63%)	57 (66%)	
2004	70	47 (100%)	42 (89%)	40 (85%)	43 (91%)	33 (70%)	34 (72%)	35 (74%)	36 (77%)	33 (70%)	
2005	61	92 (100%)	68 (74%)	65 (71%)	60 (65%)	54 (59%)	57 (62%)	56 (61%)	52 (57%)	-	
2006	87	48 (100%)	35 (73%)	28 (58%)	28 (58%)	24 (50%)	25 (52%)	25 (52%)	-	-	
2007	80	95 (100%)	75 (79%)	71 (75%)	57 (60%)	53 (56%)	50 (53%)	-	-	-	
2008	95	71 (100%)	65 (92%)	50 (70%)	47 (66%)	42 (59%)	-	-	-	-	
2009	95	97 (100%)	90 (93%)	79 (81%)	67 (69%)	-	-	-	-	-	
2010	97	72 (100%)	63 (88%)	59 (82%)	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2011	90	113 (100%)	97 (86%)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

* Total number of veterinary graduates from Massey University for the respective year.

The 2014-15 NZVC workforce survey repeated this data and found a slightly more positive result with about 75% of New Zealand trained veterinarians continuing to take out an annual practicing certificate 10 years after the date of first registration, (NZVC, 2014-15).

Four years previously, I was also fortunate enough to be offered shareholding within my practice which gave my role a whole new dimension. It also meant that I now had a responsibility for making sure that I did everything within my power to try and retain the younger vets in our practice. To be successful in doing this though, I needed to understand why vets were leaving. If there was a way to gather some information and attempt to make sense of it, I was up for it. I wanted to know if there was anything we could find out about why vets leave rural clinical practice and then can rural clinic owners/managers possibly do things differently to ensure the future of their business? Roll on a Kellogg project!

Literature Review

There are a number of New Zealand papers available that have broached this subject but the vast majority were opinion papers or perspective papers, with not too many hard questions being asked.

Guilford (2005), who at the time was the head of the Institute of Veterinary, Animal, and Biomedical Sciences (IVABS) at Massey University, identified retention issues for young veterinarians in rural practice, and questioned career satisfaction within this group. He suggested that new business concepts may need to be adopted. As an academic, his ideas included the amalgamation of practices into large corporates (whether vet or non-vet owned) and diversification of traditional practices into business with more services e.g. farm consultancy, financial planning, research and so on. He also discussed the possibility of changing the selection process to get in to the Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) degree to attract and accept people who were more likely to stay in the rural area as rural veterinarians.

In 2004 a two-stage survey was undertaken that looked at issues related to recruitment and retention of veterinarians into practice; at the strengths and weakness of the Massey veterinary programme and lastly the effects of the change of demographics entering the profession (Parkinson and Gilling, 2005). Their study emphasised that there are problems with recruitment and retention of veterinarians in to rural practices and that the causes are complex, multifactorial and (shockingly), not readily amenable to simplistic solutions.

Parkinson (2013), looked into the changing role of rural veterinarians and so changing the expectations of veterinary graduates. He is heavily involved in setting the curriculum at Massey University veterinary school and was therefore wanting to ensure that vets were adequately trained for rural practice. Consequently, a new curriculum started in 2013 that was radically different from its predecessors. Greater emphasis was now placed on using knowledge rather than memorising it, developing technical skills as well as interpersonal skills. Parkinson couldn't deny the success of the veterinary graduates is a true partnership between university and also the practice in which they start their career. That first job is the key stage in transition from student to independent practitioner, and employers need to ensure key skill sets are gained and that there is an appropriate support structure in place if these young vets are to survive and enjoy clinical practice.

Further on from this, 2017 marks the first intake of veterinary students using the revised entry requirements, to try and attract people more likely to stay in the profession. The new process for veterinary student selection gives equal weighting to academic and non-academic merits (NZVA, 2017). The selection process now includes a weekend of multiple mini interviews to assess personal attributes that the New Zealand veterinary community identified as important, including the way applicants look at teamwork and how they think, solve problems and communicate (NZVA, 2017). It will be interesting to see what impact altering the selection process has on the future of the profession and if we see increases in retention rates in the future.

Method

I wanted to survey as many veterinarians as possible, while knowing that expected survey responses (especially within the veterinarian profession for some reason) are very low, and I could realistically expect replies from about 10% of people I sent the survey to. Therefore, I wanted the survey to be quick, to the point and not take very long to complete to maximise the number of respondents. I developed a 10-question survey on Survey Monkey (see appendix 1 for full survey), and attempted to tap into as many networks as I thought possible to reach as many vets as I could.

The New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA), is the only membership association representing veterinarians in New Zealand. The NZVA is there for members: to support them, serve them and help the profession. Therefore, it was no surprise that Callum Irvine, the head of veterinary services at the time, did not hesitate to allow me access to their database. On August 25th the survey link was sent to all 2,150 NZVA members in their monthly issue of VetNews. An issue I could see with this avenue was the majority of members would still be practising vets and I wanted to tap into non-practising vets as well.

The New Zealand Veterinary Council (NZVC) was another avenue I explored. The NZVC are the regulating body of vets in New Zealand. They are responsible for regulating vets and issuing practicing certificates. The NZVC is really there for the public, to ensure vets are qualified, competent and abide by the rules. They also handle complaints from members of the public about veterinarians. There is an option with the NZVC to stay connected as a non-practising vet so their database would have had wider reach. I contacted the NZVC to see if they would be willing for my survey to be sent to all those on their database. Unfortunately, on August 18th I got a very disheartening reply from Wayne Ricketts, a professional advisor at the vet council. He informed me that the vet council had already signed up to jointly fund a very similar Ph. D project in association with Massey University and the NZVA which was due to start very soon. He felt they would not want to interfere with me carrying out my project and he was concerned about the possibility of survey fatigue (i.e. veterinarians being canvassed and surveyed on very similar questions). Therefore, he declined my request to access the NZVC database, which disappointed me greatly. I really thought the more information as possible on the subject would only benefit the profession. It was also daunting to know I was attempting a Ph. D subject with no funding and little resources and therefore would I do the topic justice?!

I also attempted to use the newly formed database of the Massey Vet School Alumni, which has access to all the people who have graduated from Massey Vet School. Unfortunately, my contact with them went unanswered. Then I turned to good old social media and used contacts to put the link on closed groups for different years of graduation. I also emailed the link to a number of fellow vets throughout the country and asked them to forward to their colleagues and friends.

One last attempt was made in early October for a final reach and I sent the link to all the clinics in New Zealand that are members of XLVets. XLVets member clinics represent the most progressive and innovative vet practices in New Zealand. Knowing this, I was expecting to get some more positive results from these respondents.

I closed the survey off on 21st of October, having collected 205 responses. Although more would always be better, given my resources I thought this was a good number of replies to sink my teeth into, knowing there would be some good information within those replies.

Analysis

I had 205 responses to my survey. Figure 1 shows the spread of ages of the respondents.

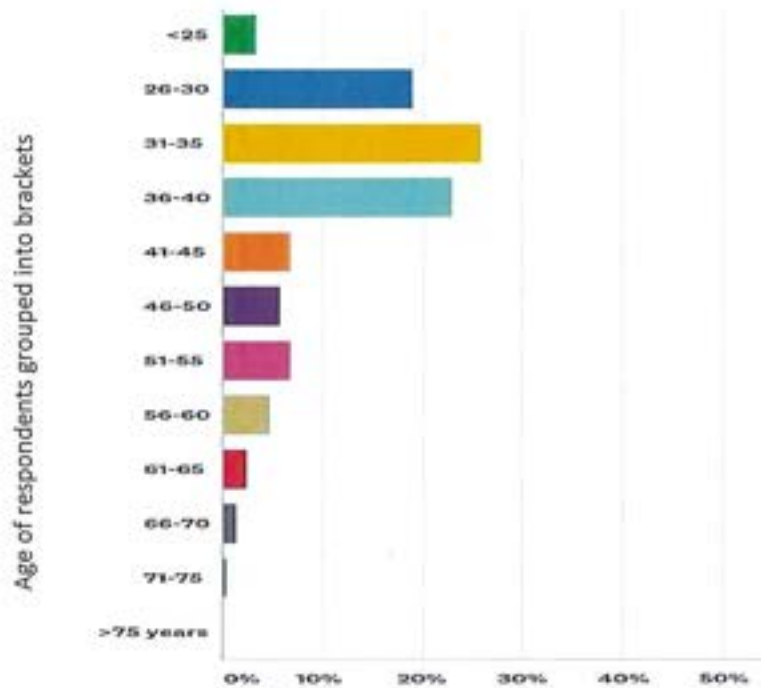


Figure 1. Graph showing distribution of ages of survey respondents.

The majority of respondents (71.21%) were under 40 years old. I wasn't completely surprised by this for a couple of reasons – the use of social media was always going to mean younger people were targeted, and being an electronic survey there was the possibility it was going to go unanswered. I was not too worried about having a higher percentage of younger people replying due to the 10-year retention rates of new vets and therefore the younger respondents were more likely to be in the throes of making or breaking their career in rural clinical practice and could maybe therefore offer more raw and recent data for me.

Figure 2 shows the spread of male versus female respondents, with approx. 65% female to 35% male. This is not surprising considering the ratio of females to males graduating vet school.

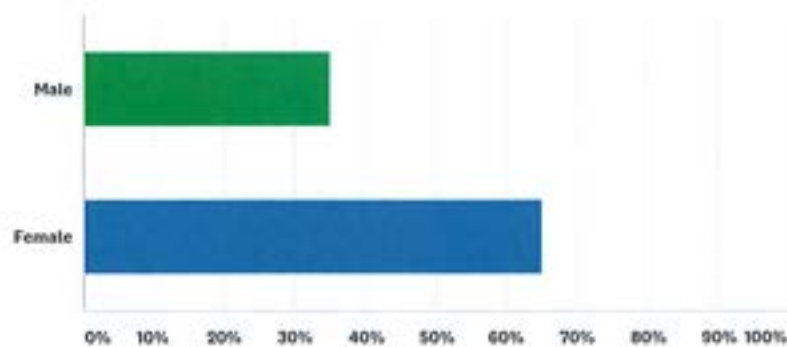


Figure 2. Number of respondents that were male and female.

Figure 3 shows the years of graduation, which not surprisingly follow the trend of the ages of the respondents.

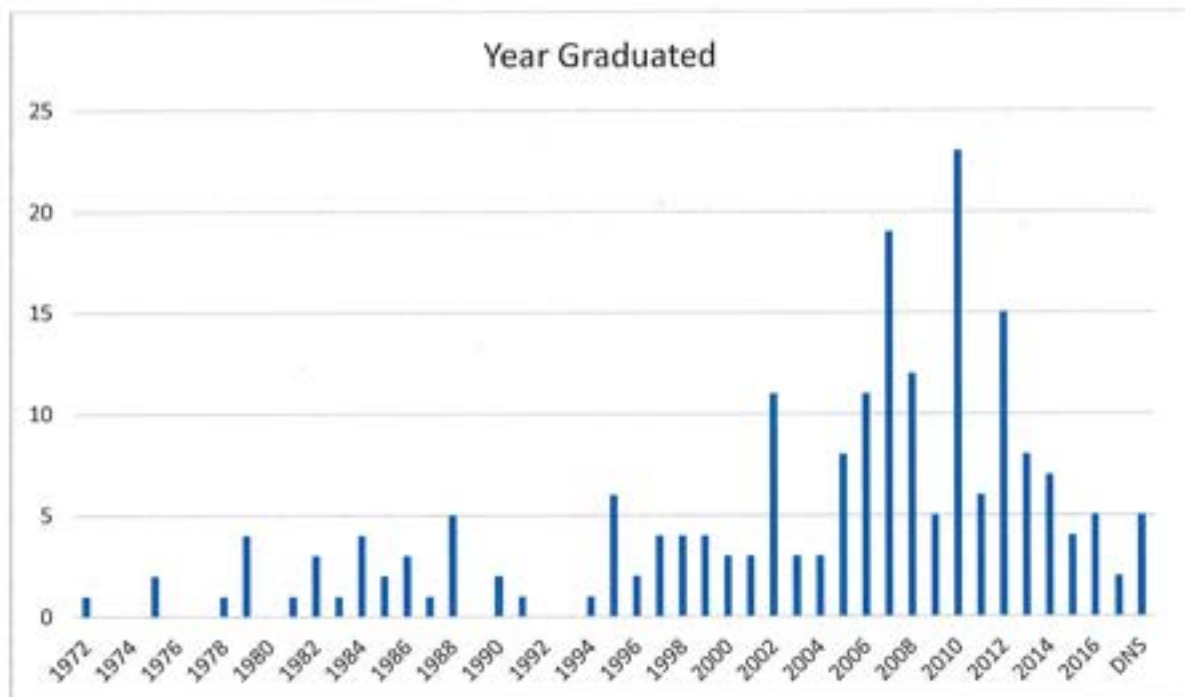


Figure 3. Years that the respondents graduated from Vet School. Note DNS = for did not state.

Figure 4 shows the places of study for the respondents. It is no surprise it is dominated by Massey University graduates as this is the only university in New Zealand that you can study to become a vet. It was pleasing to see that 17% of respondents had trained overseas and were making their way to New Zealand.

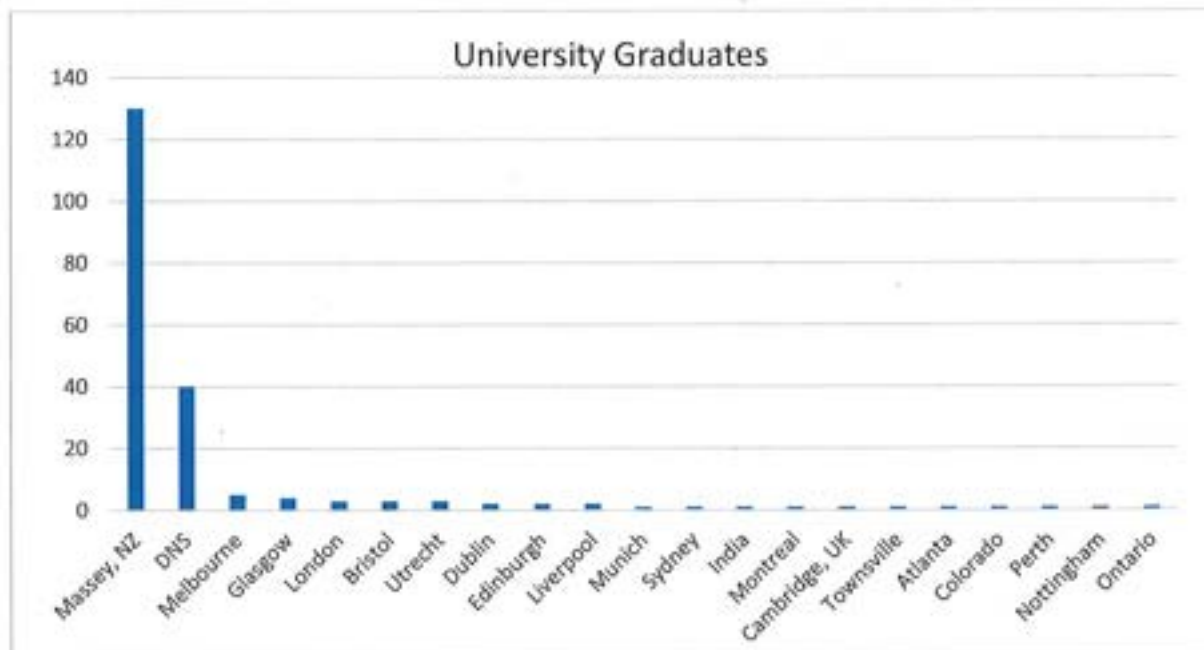


Figure 4. Universities where the respondents graduated from vet school. Again DNS = did not state.

The vast majority of respondents were still working within the veterinary industry which was positive to see (figure 5).

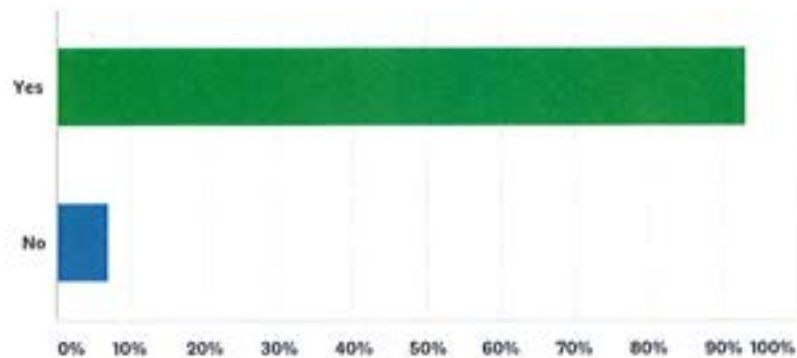


Figure 5. Percentage of respondents still working in the veterinary industry.

This question did cause a bit of ambiguity but respondents did explain their answer if they felt the need to do so. Some commented they were about to leave, others were currently on maternity leave- did that count? Surprisingly, calling it the veterinary 'industry' did cause alarm with one respondent, stating they preferred it to be called the veterinary profession and that maybe the perception that we are an industry, not a profession, is part of the problem I am trying to unlock.

A number of respondents although not in clinical practice, did regard their current role as being within the veterinary profession, which shows the diversity of the degree. These people were consultants, working for industry groups or in education.

Those who were no longer working in the veterinary industry had gone a number of ways, either broadening their skills to management level or farming with family, or for family reasons; or they had left the industry completely due to burn out, disillusionment, stress and the long hours. These respondents had moved on to a variety of careers including web design, project management, doctor, agribusiness management or joined the army. A handful of respondents had retired as well.

Narrowing my survey to target rural practitioners, the next question asked if they had ever worked in rural clinical practice in New Zealand (figure 6). If they answered no to this question then their survey finished and thanked them for their time. I really wanted to focus on the rural areas for my project. Luckily 95% answered yes to this question and therefore they continued with the survey.

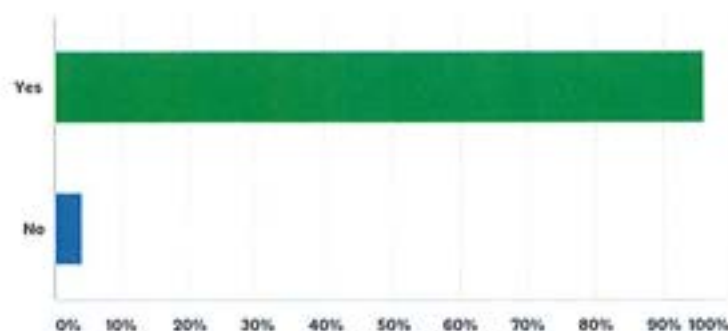


Figure 6. 95% of respondents answered 'yes', they had worked in rural clinical practice in NZ

Even more pleasing, figure 7 shows, that of these 95% that had worked in rural clinical practice, about 75% were currently employed in rural clinical practice, meaning 25% of the respondents had left.

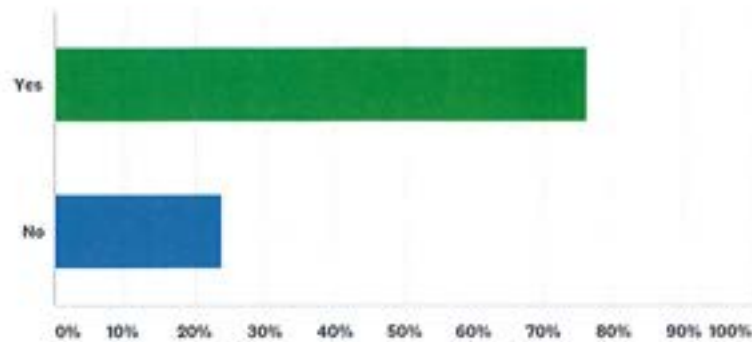


Figure 7. Percentage of respondents still employed in rural clinical practice in NZ.

These results indicated that the retention rates were better than the 2011 NZVC survey, but a number of factors would be confounding this such as 87/205 respondents that were less than 10 years graduated, and my lack of ability to get the survey to a wider group.

The next question I asked was to get more of an insight into what roles people currently had whether still in rural clinical practice or not, to see how many were in management or other roles. Figure 8 shows the results of what respondents currently spend greater than 50% of their day doing. It shows a variety of roles and responsibilities, but overwhelmingly the vast majority still spend most of their day doing clinical work.

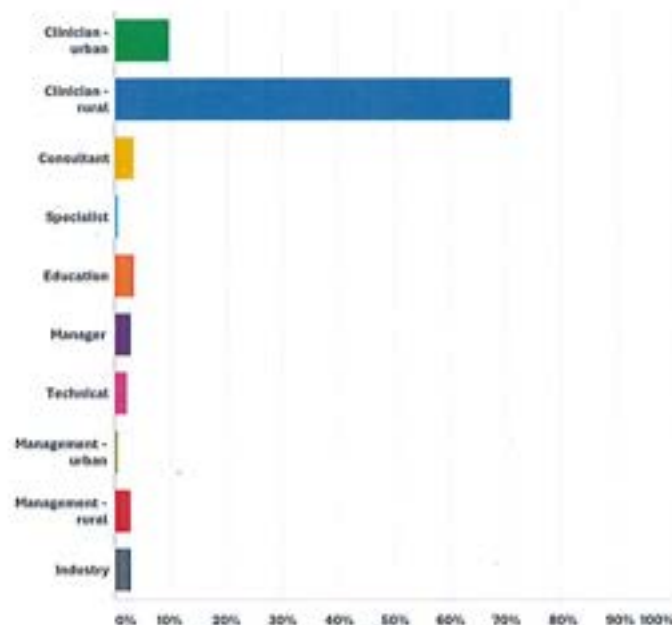


Figure 8. What respondents currently spend >50% of their day doing.

My last question in the survey pertained to shareholding. Without wanting to hammer on about succession, there is a very real risk that veterinary retention will become such an issue, that practices won't have young vets coming through that are keen to buy into the clinic. Therefore, the only option for existing shareholders may be to sell out to larger corporates when their time comes. That is why I asked the question in my survey: Are you currently a shareholder in the practice and if not, why not?

126 respondents answered this question with the following results:

Yes, current shareholder or in process to becoming one	19%
Want to be but no opportunity given	15.9%
Not at this stage - new/recent grad	9.5%
Use to be	4.8%
No and don't want to be	31%
No and wouldn't at current practice	1.6%
No	18.3%

49.2% of respondents were interested in shareholding in a vet clinic.

50.8% were not interested

Reasons given by the respondents that said yes, they would like to be shareholders, but hadn't been given the opportunity included:

- *Corporate clinics keep shareholders close*
- *Not available easily*
- *Being a part-time female working in a practice with older male vets as the shareholders*
- *Lack of opportunity in large corporate clinics*

Reasons given by respondents who did not want to be a shareholder included:

- *I don't want to "be them" in 5-10 years. They have all made massive sacrifices in their family and personal life to advance their career. I'm happy earning less money and feeling better emotionally and less stressed by being an employee.*
- *Never offered, and would decline if I was as you have to like and respect the people you are in business with.*
- *Who wants the staffing headaches, moderate returns and uncertainty of how to exit the business from vet practice? Shares offer a 10% return (in the long run, in general) without the hassle, and having to cover Christmas when no one else is available!*
- *No, I am not into buying myself a job!*
- *I enjoy being a vet but don't have any interest in business/management and don't want the extra pressures involved in this.*
- *No desire for added financial stress or time commitment*
- *I have other investments as veterinary practice returns are questionable*

- *Work life balance*
- *I'm not going to be a vet forever*
- *Clientele money problems and very sick pets*
- *Freedom to leave whenever – flexibility*
- *Succession issues when wanting to exit*
- *Poor return on investment*

With responses like these, who can blame these vets for not wanting to buy into a vet clinic? While we know that shareholding isn't for everyone, I was genuinely surprised by the number of respondents who were not interested in becoming a shareholder.

If half of the vets you have working for your practice, have no interest in becoming a shareholding, then what else can employers do to retain these vets when ownership is not the answer? Ultimately this is what I wanted to try and uncover.

Discussion

I have themed the data into five main areas and then included a sixth section to cover off a couple of items that while didn't fit into any of the other themes, were too important to ignore. Each theme contains both the positive and negative aspects of the feedback I received.

1) The Job

i. The Clients

The most common theme that respondents still in rural vet practice mentioned was the vet/farmer bond. A huge 45 out of 141 respondents still in rural clinical practice mentioned the importance or joy of a good vet- farmer or vet-client relationship. Obviously, these relationships are a two-way street and vets new to a rural community can't just expect these relationships to happen. Steps need to be taken by both parties to ensure these relationships are nurtured. The vet can only control what they do, but in a small rural town this can actually be quite easy if the new vet is wanting it. All it might take is stopping in at the local pub after work on a Friday, shopping in the local stores, judging at pet days, or going along to business house bowls (and other such social events). Clearly it helps to live in and be immersed in the local community. Vets still working in rural clinical practice mentioned they had become a community member and thrived at being recognised as part of this community.

Some respondents mentioned that it was even more rewarding when the clients they were working with were highly motivated and passionate about their business. It made their job a lot easier as the farmer understood what they were trying to achieve. In a lot of cases these were the more proactive farmers rather reactive, and the vets were not just being the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. There were also comments made that dealing with farmers was a lot more enjoyable as they perceived them as '*less highly strung*' compared to small animal and equine clients.

Further to the client relationship, 21 people also mentioned the satisfaction gained from working with stock and animals, and being perceived as a part of the business, i.e. getting involved in the consultation and financial side of farming enterprises. Clearly working with animals is a privilege for anyone and production animals are no different. They can be remarkably hardy animals and often you end up wondering how on earth they are still alive! Being trusted by the farmer to let you into their business is also a privilege and often has to be earned, just as you earn your way to diagnose and treat animals by attending vet school.

The flip side of these valuable relationships was the pressure felt by vets to seek acceptance from clients, and having to prove their worth. One respondent referred to '*neurotic*' clients, which I'm sure every vet can relate to, but individuals have different coping mechanisms for dealing with these people. Particularly, is the perception that vets are very expensive and that vets must only be in it for the money. Statements from clients such as 'I googled it and it could be...', and 'my breeder says...', may seem innocent enough but they are very disrespectful to a veterinarian's education, training and experience. One respondent felt they were only respected for being a ride home from the pub when on call.

ii. Variety

22 out of 141 still in rural clinical practice mentioned the day to day variety as a reason they stay (which is surprising when you read further on!). This referred to the different species that were dealt with on a daily basis and the unpredictable nature of the job. They felt this was keeping their mind ticking and keeping them on their toes so to speak. Four mentioned the challenge of the job and the case load they dealt with was still keeping them engaged. The opportunities that presented themselves to these vets didn't go unnoticed either. Which a number of people mentioning the diversity in their role with regards to research, management and mentoring. These were additional to being a clinical vet and did depend on the practice they were at, and also the willingness of the vet to embrace these added challenges. Many had gone on to do further study as well to help reach these goals.

However, 24 of the 44 respondents that had left clinical practice stated the repetitive work, lack of stimulation and variety as a major contributing factor for leaving. They felt unchallenged, stale and trapped due to the monotony and technician work. If you take a dairy vet job for example, the seasonal nature the New Zealand dairy industry directly dictates the seasonality of a dairy vet's life.

January- February: pregnancy testing time, mainly using an ultrasound scanner these days and accurately aging the foetus.

March- April: trace element testing (bloods and liver biopsies), milk quality and restricted veterinary medicine consultations. Animal health plans and body condition scoring for dry off dates. Winter feed plans.

May: dry cow therapy administration, more pregnancy test to check for empty cows that have aborted.

June: heifer teatsealing, body condition scoring and seminar time (and maybe a quick holiday!).

July-August: Calving time, helping cows calve, treating downer cows and sick calves and generally an ambulatory vet other than some routine blood work. Calf disbudding.

September: Metricheking and treating cows with a uterine infection, blood testing and body condition scoring all to try and ensure cows get back in calf. Bull testing and calf disbudding.

October: reproductive work, synchronizing heifers and treating cows that aren't cycling.

November-December: quieter time, some young stock issues, some early pregnancy testing.

Vets are generally intelligent people, driven to succeed. They have generally done well at high school and then made it through five tough years at university. With all that in mind, some of the routine work did seem mundane and boring, and made these people feel stale and unstimulated. Obviously throughout the year there are always sick animals, lame animals and herd outbreaks. But a lot of the above jobs are routine work and it is common place to use technicians for many of these jobs. In more recent years we have also seen lay scanners popping up for pregnancy testing in cattle. These franchises also offer other services such as disbudding, vaccinating, DNA sampling and extra teat removal – all jobs that traditionally a vet has done. And if something goes wrong after any of the above are performed? Call your vet of course. Nowadays the majority of rural clinics employ their own technicians to do the bulk of the disbudding, dry cow and teat seal insertion, blood testing and vaccinating. This does increase vet morale with less time spent doing the repetitive work and therefore more time to do the 'real' vet work: sick cows, consultancy, health plans etc. The down side is that the technician work is very seasonal and some smaller clinics can't justify having multiple

technicians employed to cover the busy times but then no work for them in the quieter times. Bigger teams are often blessed with other work to carry technicians through such as research and the ability to slot into the small animal nursing roster. Technicians usually cost less than vets but another down side is they can't be included in the after-hours roster. For example, if a practice employed 4 vets and 2 technicians, the vets wouldn't end up doing a lot of technician work, but they would have a 1:4 after hours rota. Compare that to a 6-vet practice where they had a very comfortable 1 in 6 roster but had to do all the technician work themselves. Can you have your cake and eat it too??

iii. After Hours

Almost as many vets who had mentioned the repetitive work and lack of stimulation as a reason for leaving rural clinical practice, also mentioned after hours as another reason for leaving (23/44 respondents).

Veterinarians in clinical practice must make an emergency service available at all times. This service is required so that their clients' animals can receive essential veterinary treatment in order to relieve unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress. The emergency service must be sufficiently resourced, so that except in extraordinary circumstances all veterinary emergencies involving clients' animals are attended in reasonable time to ensure the welfare of the animals. (NZVC, n.d.).

If you have never been exposed to anyone close to you being on call, as is the case of many students attending vet school, then nothing can totally prepare a student for a life of on call. Most cities in New Zealand have the luxury of having an after-hours clinic that can provide all the emergency care out of normal work hours. Unfortunately, in rural practice it is generally unavoidable and therefore it is up to practice owners and managers to make it as palatable as possible to veterinary staff, in order to ease the burden as much as possible. Some respondents commented that they got no time off in lieu after working a weekend and that some of the after-hour rotas were as little as 1 in 2 weekends. While on call you may not be flat tack with calls all weekend, however most people, especially younger graduates found it very difficult to fully relax when they had the after-hours phone: being on edge the whole time and therefore not having a refreshing weekend break. If it is a busy weekend with interrupted sleep then it is very easy for the vet to become fatigued. While most will cope with this, others may not and this could potentially lead to accidents and mishaps happening.

Other comments made by respondents were the safety aspect of after hours. I'm not sure if this related to going out on farms to unknown customers or if it referred to coming into the clinic late at night but both situations are plausible and practices should take steps to ensure employees feel safe at all times. One respondent mentioned as a single female she didn't feel safe as often no one would have any idea where she was. A solution could be as simple as setting up a buddy system, letting them text someone else from the clinic their whereabouts, or having work vehicles installed with GPS monitors so they can be tracked at all times.

Safety at the clinic can also be addressed with some modifications. Rather than vets having to get out of their car to open the main door, and feeling exposed while doing so, some clinics have a roller door round the side of the building. Vets can then open this up, drive in and then shut it behind them before having to get out of the vehicle and turning off the alarm. Security cameras and monitors can all help with the situation as well. Communication is key in finding out how everyone is feeling and if there are any ideas or ways to make things better. After all it is the employer's responsibility to ensure staff feel safe to go about their jobs.

Other comments made regarding the after-hours work related mainly to work life balance and family time. Some clinics do not offer time in lieu or any financial contribution as compensation for weekends worked which is very hard to believe. The majority do offer half a day or a full day in lieu as recompense and some clinics have gone so far as to paying the vet part or all of the after-hours component of the fee. While offering an after-hours service is non-negotiable, it is easy to see why vets are unhappy about after hours when it takes time away from their family and then nothing is given back to them to make it worthwhile. Just because this is what the profession has always done does not mean it is the acceptable way going forward.

Anon. (2009), made an important point. That practices should take every opportunity to share after hours, even in rival situations – that way everyone wins. If members of other practices can't be trusted despite being in the same profession then it is very sad.

iv. Job Satisfaction

Not surprisingly, this was another reason that vets in rural clinical practice had stayed there, with 17 out of 141 mentioning either job satisfaction or enjoyment as a reason. Many still found the job rewarding and enjoyed seeing the outcome of not only individual animal treatment, but production increases due to implementation of herd health programmes instigated by the vet. Remuneration was mentioned by 10 respondents as being good, and the younger graduates were happy with the incremental salary increase for the first five years. A number enjoyed the physical nature of the job as it kept them fit without the need for spending money or time going to the gym. However, 11 out of the 44 respondents that had left clinical practice left due to the physical nature of the work. Comments were made with regard to injury and also not feeling safe doing the usual work while pregnant. Again, this comes back on employers ensuring a safe work place but again simple changes could be put in place such as, there must always be a farm worker with the vet to increase the safety. For pregnant vets a conversation should take place early on to see what jobs are not possible and then the team pitching in to make this happen where possible. Bending over to do lame cows, or bending over a race to pregnancy test heifers and such like are jobs that should not be left to a pregnant vet. Having not been pregnant I can't really make much more comment, but I do believe communication is key, as well as having a supportive team.

Work load and long days also negated some of the positive comments coming through. 12 out of the 44 respondents that had left rural clinical practice referred to this in one way or another. Long days were common, often working more than 60 hours per week. Due to the nature of the work, a lot of jobs were carried out during milking, which would mean the vet was there at 5am or whatever time cups are on to carry out the job – which makes sense – less walking for the cows, not waiting around on concrete and more time in the paddock eating. But then continuing a full working day afterwards until 5.30pm is a big ask let alone if you were on call that night as well! Most dairy vets see the need for early starts, and are happy to do so, but it comes back on the employer to do their best to keep it to an 8-hour working day. In that sense, the working day should merely shift: for an early start there should be an early finish locked in the diary for that same day, and unless a drastic emergency comes in with no one else available to do this, then the vet goes home. No one should make the vet feel guilty for having an early finish! One comment was made that they worked such long hours they had no time for a social life (refer to page 24 on how this can also negatively affect fitting into a small community). One respondent commented that they felt very little recognition for the work that they did do, unless they put in long hours.

Baby boomers (born roughly 1946-1964) were ready to work as hard as needed to get the job done and don't leave work until it is finished – they don't see work-life balance as very important (Hay, 2008). Increasingly, through Gen X and Gen Y work life balance is more important. Gen Y's respond best to an organisation that provides opportunities, fun, variety and interest – salary alone is not a great attractor (Hay, 2008).

Other comments were that calls were booked all day with no time for breaks and some always felt they were rushing everywhere. It is really important that the support staff booking in calls are acutely aware of the vets out on the road getting toilet stops and lunch breaks. The office staff often have their lunch break set in stone and it is equally important for vets to have this time too, while having the flexibility to service clients.

2) The Practice

The respondents who continued to work in rural clinical practice could not rave highly enough about the features of their practice that made them want to stay. I themed them up into three main groups.

i. The People

The people within a practice made a huge difference to those that want to stay there. Without a doubt it was the colleagues at the practice that made or broke the deal. 16 respondents mentioned that the colleagues were as important to them as the work, and that they felt they were more like family or mates rather than just work colleagues. This is hugely important in the daily life of a vet, having people you trust to talk to and discuss cases with, to bounce ideas off and discuss differential diagnoses and treatment plans. With this we are united with a common purpose and if there is respect for each other everyone can enjoy working together to achieve that purpose. Further on from just fellow vets, the importance of good support staff who understand what you do was very important in a practice. Equally so was the boss. Lack of resources was another factor contributing to the exit from rural clinical practice.

Support and mentoring for new graduates has been discussed by a number of people (Parkinson, 2013) as being a huge indicator as to whether new graduates succeed. The lack of both these things was brought up by 10 respondents as contributing factors for them leaving rural practice.

ii. The Culture

The culture of a practice also seemed to make or break whether a vet wanted to stay on there. Understanding that there was life outside of work was hugely important. Six respondents commented that their practices did this very well, while 12 of the respondents that had left mentioned the huge drain on family, and family life suffering due to work life balance. And while this is not completely the fault of practices – I definitely believe that a degree of this is up to the individual to ensure better work life balance, practices should not be encouraging long work hours, or clients calling vets directly after hours when they are not necessarily the on-call vet. Technology and cell phones have come a long way over the past 20 years – so that we are always accessible, which can also be at the detriment to family life. Often the vet sees the farmer calling and feels the need to respond, so this is also a two-part situation: training farmers only to ring the on-call vet, and training vets not to answer those calls. Often it is not possible to turn the phone off due to it being a personal use phone as well.

One respondent did mention that contact while on maternity leave was a positive thing to feel as though they were still part of the team. This could be as simple as letting them know when department meetings are to see if they wanted to attend and ensuring they got meeting minutes and updates.

The leadership and the management at a practice was also a deal breaker for 10 respondents. Some mentioned that they had to endure 'corporate style middle management', and management that crossed over veterinary boundaries with no regard for veterinary input. This can be a delicate topic to tackle, as most vets have very poor management skills and senior vets are often put in management roles. Contrastingly, you can employ a practice or business manager, with glowing references, but with no understanding of veterinarian roles and there can be conflict. All managers must have an attitude of sincere interest in the team, in their well-being, welfare, concerns, anxieties, aspirations, problems in executing the job, learning, need for knowledge and objective-

setting and progress – this is what inspires people (Dinnell, 2007). This is no different for a manager coming in from a non-veterinary background. They need to know the ins and outs of the role, and know their limitations with regard to clinical advice and when to get help from another veterinarian within the practice.

Bryan (2010) did discuss the benefits of larger clinics with regards to veterinary retention: a better roster, or at the very least more support when on call and better resources for younger vets. More vets means it may be easier to find a sympathetic or understanding ear and more support staff which allows for better social interaction. However, a number of respondents did mention that they found working in larger 'corporate' clinics less enjoyable, with protocols being more rigid and less flexibility to adapt to individual circumstances. Which brings me nicely to my next theme.

iii. Flexibility

How adaptable to change and having the flexibility to ride a number of different waves was mentioned by over 30 respondents. It was a motivator to stay employed if the practice was flexible with hours, part time work, species worked on, going into management roles, offered extended leave for overseas travel and allowed time off for children, for example, pet day or cross country. Conversely, rigid hours, lack of flexibility and flexi time and no opportunity for part time work were all reasons given for respondents leaving rural clinical practice. Bryan (2010) also made reference to the changes between generations and how Gen Y people tend to want to change their focus and their role far more often than their older counterparts. So, if you have good vets it is nice to be able help them out, and accommodate them in other areas of the business rather than lose them to the opposition.

Being flexible within roles and offering alternatives to a rigid 5 day a week job will be a necessity when attempting to retain veterinarians.

3) The Lifestyle

The way in which a rural veterinarian lives came out as a very positive reason for vets to stay in rural clinical practice. 66 out of 141 vets still in rural clinical practice referred to the lifestyle as a reason they were still there. They enjoyed being a part of a small community, whether it was where they had grown up and were returning to roots, or a new-found love for the rural way of life. The location of the practice was important in terms of cheaper housing options, but also enabling their family to farm in a certain area or stay connected with extended family more often. Many enjoyed not only being outside most of the day, but also having the great outdoors right on their door step. One respondent mentioned the simplest of things, that they enjoyed having their dog with them all day.

Some respondents however, found the rural life style isolating, especially '*as a young single female working long hours*', it was hard to meet people. Others found all the travel tiring, and that the lack of good schooling in a particular area were a reason to move on from rural clinical practice and into the city. Most of these factors are beyond the control of employers other than possibly the travel. It makes sense to minimise the travel by a single vet by having vets stay in 'areas' for a day rather than travelling from one end of the catchment to the other. This comes back to support staff who book in the calls being aware of where clients live and making it work as well as possible, while knowing that some travel will be unavoidable.

4) The Production Animal Industry

15 out of the 44 respondents that had left rural clinical practice cited disillusionment within the production animal industry as a reason. Comments were made regarding the frustration of not being able to do the best thing by the animal due to farmer constraints and economics – especially in the dairy down turn. The lack of individual animal care and case work up were also mentioned. Some of the more common calls on dairy farms such as treatment of large numbers of lame cows and the apparent acceptance that rotten calvings are 'normal' were also reasons vets had left.

It has been well documented that the services provided by a rural veterinarian are changing and therefore vet's expectations need to change. The demands for veterinary services are becoming more sophisticated and vets are expected to be able to provide services that are whole-farm based rather than individual animal based. The James Herriot model, while not completely dead, is becoming less relevant to farming the 21st century. The veterinarian of the future will need to be able to contribute as part of the management team of large corporate farming enterprises, with broad skills in management, farm planning, nutrition, farm design, environmental sustainability and nutrient management, as well as the usually expected roles in animal health and welfare (Wild, 2010).

A couple of respondents noted sexism from farmers as a reason for leaving which I found surprising. It had been a long-standing trend that more women were applying to enter vet school, and inevitably therefore, more women than men graduate and enter the work force (Weston, 2003). In Parkinson and Gilling's survey they found that women are mostly well accepted by farmers throughout NZ. Farmers were accepting of their skill especially after 'proving' themselves on the first visit.

5) Wellness

Stress, anxiety and poor coping mechanisms were mentioned by 12 respondents that had left rural clinical practice. As rural veterinarians we need to be aware of the mental well-being of our colleagues, which is often poor; and the higher risk of suicide amongst members of the profession (Bryan 2010). Depression – the black dog – has a valid application to the topic of poor retention in the veterinary industry (Anon, 2009). Vets are high-achieving, driven, ambitious people who have for whatever reason become derailed. Many vets have perfectionist personalities and don't enjoy failing – it is how they got in to and got through veterinary school. Then all of a sudden in the real-world, it costs too much to give the animal the gold standard treatment, even though the animal would benefit from further or more intensive treatment. And often we are accused by clients for just being in it for the money – if only they knew their true cost of non-subsidised drugs and treatment compared to human medicine! And how little a vet's hourly rate worked out when all hours worked are taken into account and not to mention the debt that needs to be serviced – in particular student loans.

Grouping together the harsh emotional stress, the financial burden, the odd working hours and, potentially, the normalisation of euthanasia, a picture starts to come together (Bish, 2017). As rural veterinarians we need to be acutely aware of this and be mindful of the mental health of all those around us – both vets and farmers. We need to remove the stigmatisation of depression and be prepared to talk about it rather than shy away and employers need to invest sufficient time and energy into a state of daily wellness. Happy vets mean happy clients, and happy clients tend to make the cash register sing (Anon, 2009).

Anon. 2009 made some very good suggestions for employers to take on board to help with their vet's wellness:

- Do your best to ensure vets like being a part of your practice and do not feel like they are pinned at the bottom of the corporate ladder. Dangle the carrot rather than brandish the big stick – after all rural vets are in short supply and it is a seller's market for them.
- Support staff – as mentioned previously you can't underestimate the role and influence that the wider team has especially on the more junior vets who inevitably spend more time with them.
- Show a lower tolerance of nuisance clients – while we have an obligation to show professional courtesy, rude and abusive people should be shown the door - often such people have no concept of loyalty. Stick up for your vets.
- Safety – safety of your vets is a number one priority. Farmers with shoddy yards need to be reminded about health and safety. Provide vets with all necessary equipment to do a job well and ensure safe outcomes.
- Breaks – as mentioned previously all staff need an adequate lunch break. Often rural vets are expected to grab some food between calls, eat it while they drive, with unwashed hands (oh the *Campylobacter* and *Cryptosporidiosis* and other zoonoses!). Healthy eating directly impacts on wellbeing.

The Riptide Project is a relatively new initiative, both online and on various social media platforms. A riptide is strong current that causes disturbances under the water but it can also be described as a strong negative feeling or force that is difficult to control. Ideally, riptides should be spotted and avoided from afar, but even with our best intentions, we sometimes get caught off guard and pulled under (Anon, 2017). Veterinary professionals all enter the industry with the same passion to help

animals, and the riptide project is a movement for vets to help each other. Their Facebook page shares stories from veterinarians all around the world which show the ebbs and flows that all vets experience so you know you are not alone. It is a platform to get vets talking and to share experiences and let them realise they are part of a much greater network.

6) Other comments made that are likely to help retain vets

I have only a few more items that I thought it necessary to mention with regards to helping retain vets. Practices that kept up with technology and provided up-to-date equipment and vehicles had a better chance of retaining vets. There is nothing worse than going off to do a job with sub-standard equipment that doesn't work properly. It is frustrating for the vet and farmer and ultimately if someone else has the best equipment the farmer may start using them instead to get a better job done.

The rural bonding scheme has been another system that has helped to keep vets in rural clinical practice, but it is a recent initiative and only preliminary numbers are available. It was introduced by the government in February 2009 with 2 objectives:

- to retain newly graduated veterinary professionals in specific communities by offering incentives, and
- to direct these graduates into communities and specialised fields that are facing workforce shortages in New Zealand. (IRD, 2013)

To help ease the shortage of rural veterinarians working with production animals, MPI set up the Voluntary Bonding Scheme for veterinarians. The scheme aims to attract and retain graduate vets into rural practice. It provides a payment to recently graduated vets who work in an eligible practice with a primary focus in production animals. People taking part in the scheme are eligible for \$55,000 (\$11,000 each year) over the 5 years of the scheme. MPI will pay the first instalment in your third year in the scheme, with the second and third instalments made after the fourth and fifth years respectively (MPI, 2017).

Figures released in May 2013 had 102 graduates signed up to the scheme and over that time four had left the rural practice and were therefore no longer part of the scheme (NZVA, 2013). It would be good to have more up to date figures to see the impact of this scheme but I could not find any easily.

Conclusions

No one can expect every veterinary graduate to stay in clinical practice after graduating, employers have no control over existential circumstances. Rural clinical practices are even more at risk of losing these veterinarians due to the nature of the job – the clients they deal with, the repetitive work load and the dreaded after-hours service they must provide.

However, beyond the job, individual practices have many aspects of veterinary life that they do have control over, which influence a veterinarian's decision to stay or go. These are the people within the practice, ensuring they are supportive and aware; the culture of the practice, that is healthy with good leaders and management that understand the role. Finally, practices have to be increasingly aware of being flexible, and offering innovative solutions to the traditional five day a week job. As the generations get younger, there is an ever-increasing awareness of work life balance. Younger people want to work to live, rather than live to work. If the pressure is put on them to do as their forbearers did and work every minute of every day this is a sure-fire way to ensure a speedy exit of an employee.

Physical strength was not deemed to be an issue by the majority of the respondents, however with many women ultimately wanting a family this did pose frustrations to employers with regards to maternity leave, part time work and after hours. Is this really different from other professions? The frustration likely being it is really difficult to find experienced vets to step in for these situations, but surely it means that employers need to be innovative, flexible and adaptable to work through these scenarios to obtain outcomes that suit both parties.

Finally, I cannot stress enough the important role that employers have in ensuring the wellbeing and being aware of the mental health of all their employees. All suicide numbers in New Zealand are too high, but especially veterinarians who are over represented in this annual figure. There have been a number of ideas floated for employers to take on to improve the wellness of their vets and I urge all clinics to take these on and make positive changes. It is up to all individuals to remove the stigma of depression and be prepared to talk about it rather than shy away. Employers need to invest sufficient time and energy into a state of daily wellness for all employees and in rural clinics this also extends to their farming clients.

While there is no silver bullet to solve retention issues, there is certainly the need for innovative and multi-faceted approaches from the owners and managers of rural veterinary clinics. They need to think outside the square if they want to keep the one out of two vets who do not want to be financially invested in the clinic.

The time for waiting is over. The time for change is now.

Recommendations

The recommendations from the findings of my research are directed towards veterinarian employers, including practice owners, and include the following:

- Get the right people on the bus. Ensure all staff live and breathe the values of the practice. Bad eggs can bring everyone down and should be managed out.
- Don't expect Gen Y to work themselves to the ground. Work life balance is more important to them than money. To keep them happy, allow for early finishes after early starts when it works, otherwise keep a time in lieu bank so they know they will get the time off when it is more appropriate.
- Ensure managers understand the veterinary profession. If they haven't had much exposure previously, then get them out and about to experience what the vets have to do. This can also help strengthen client relationships.
- Strong, positive leadership is non-negotiable. Some people can evolve into good leaders but others may need further training to be effective. Recognise this and make it happen.
- Talk to your employees and offer them flexible employment opportunities before they offer you a letter of resignation. Don't assume you know what they want.
- Get used to female vets: embrace them, encourage them and be excited for them if they choose to have a family. It is not the end of the world! You just have to be adaptable to make it work and get the best out of everyone.
- Do not assume vets want to be or do not want to be a shareholder. If they have shareholder and governance potential then have a conversation early on to establish what both parties are after.
- Encourage the safety of your vets at all times. Listen to vets who complain about shoddy facilities and discuss these issues with your clients. It is all too easy to get a kick in the head for everyone to have regrets.
- Keep up with technology and provide up-to-date equipment and vehicles. There is nothing worse than going off to do a job with sub-standard equipment that doesn't work properly.
- The mental wellness of all vets is hugely important and employers have a duty to maintain wellness with all their staff. Talk about the mental health and remove the stigmatisation that depression carries with it. There are a number of simple steps discussed on page 26.
- Most importantly stick up for your vets – have their back, support them and show you care about them. Inspire them.

Limitations

The intention of my survey was to reach as many vets as possible and in doing so I got the positive and negative aspects to rural clinical practice. The positive responses were roughly ¾ of my replies, with the negatives being only ¼. This was a limitation due to the avenues I had to get my survey out there in the open. It would have been amazing to access the Massey University Veterinary Alumni database, and this is hopefully something the Ph. D candidate looking into a similar topic will be able to tap into. It would have given a much broader pool of respondents.

One possibility to do it differently could have been to narrow the surveyed audience to those that are 10 years graduated or less, as this is where most of the retention issues lie. However, by doing so I could have missed some of the brilliant ideas that do help with veterinary retention.

There are definite limitations with my survey audience with regards to getting responses from people who trained as veterinarians but are no longer practicing or connected.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Full survey questions.

Rural Clinical Practice in NZ

The purpose of this survey is to gather information for my Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme research project.

I am looking into what the motivators are for vets to stay in clinical practice, in particular rural clinical practice, and what are the reasons they are leaving? A veterinary career is a lot more demanding than anyone ever prepares you for. After hours, client demands, accessibility, and obligation to help, sometimes it feels like you are on call 24/7. The high achieving instinct of vets compounds this – they are generally highly intelligent individuals who have perfectionist personalities and don't enjoy failing. With more millennials being employed there is also a huge shift in work-life balance and the mantra of working to live rather than living to work.

A 2011-12 Workforce survey showed retention rates 5 years after first registering to be approximately 60% after 5 years, and plateauing there for the next 5 years. Is there anything we can find out about why vets leave rural clinical practice and then can rural clinic owners/managers possibly do things differently to ensure the future of their business?

NOTE- for this survey, rural means outside if the centres of Whangarei, Auckland, Hamilton, Tauranga, Napier-Hastings, New Plymouth, Whanganui, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch, Dunedin and Invercargill. However, if you have a clinic in one of these centres and the majority of your case load is large animal work then that counts as rural.

1. What is your age?

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> <25 | <input type="radio"/> 51-55 |
| <input type="radio"/> 26-30 | <input type="radio"/> 56-60 |
| <input type="radio"/> 31-35 | <input type="radio"/> 61-65 |
| <input type="radio"/> 36-40 | <input type="radio"/> 66-70 |
| <input type="radio"/> 41-45 | <input type="radio"/> 71-75 |
| <input type="radio"/> 46-50 | <input type="radio"/> >75 years |

2. Male or Female?

- Male
- Female

3. What year did you graduate with your Veterinary Degree and from which University?

4. Are you still working in the Veterinary industry?

Yes

No

If no, please describe why not, and what you do now?

5. Have you ever worked in rural clinical practice in NZ?

Yes

No

6. Are you still currently employed in rural clinical practice?

Yes

No

7. If you have left rural clinical practice please comment on reasons you left. Please try to be as complete as possible and cover off as many reasons as you can.

If you are currently still in rural clinical practice can you describe your reasons for staying employed in this area.

8. Are you, or have you been a shareholder in a rural practice?
If not please state the reasons why you are not, or do not wish to be.

9. Which area do you spend most your working day CURRENTLY - i.e. >50% of your time?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Clinician - urban | <input type="radio"/> Manager |
| <input type="radio"/> Clinician - rural | <input type="radio"/> Technical |
| <input type="radio"/> Consultant | <input type="radio"/> Management - urban |
| <input type="radio"/> Specialist | <input type="radio"/> Management - rural |
| <input type="radio"/> Education | <input type="radio"/> Industry |

Other (please specify)

10. Any other comments you have with regards to retaining vets in rural clinical practice?

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3. Thank you!

I really appreciate your time. If you have any other comments or queries feel free to be in touch with me at kristina@srvs.co.nz

Cheers
Kristina Dykes