

Origins and early development of the Australian veterinary profession: the nineteenth century

There were no veterinary surgeons on the First Fleet. None were transported to Australia, or at least no graduates of the British veterinary schools. And of those, like John Stewart, who came as private individuals in the nineteenth century, few remained in practice for very long.

This was despite the importance of introduced livestock to the economies of the growing Australian colonies. The poor prospects for veterinary surgeons were due to two factors. On the one hand, a combination of the distance from the homeland and the distinctive nature of the local ecology made for a relatively low incidence of diseases in the continent. On the other, and even more importantly, livestock values soon became so low in Australia that stock owners, even when confronted with disease or injuries, seldom called on veterinary expertise. This was the single most important reason for what can only be described as the stunted development of the profession, as compared to Europe, until relatively recent times.

Nor, unlike in Europe, did veterinarians play a major role in the public sector. The stock branches formed in the late nineteenth century to meet introduced diseases employed veterinarians only in an advisory capacity. Although the desirability of adequate veterinary services was recognised, especially in the light of scientific advance, colonial governments did little to meet the need. Rather, it was prescience of a few individuals that led to the beginnings of veterinary education and the development of veterinary science in Australia.

It was in Victoria that the lead was taken in establishing first a veterinary association and then a veterinary school in the late nineteenth century. The key figures were Graham Mitchell and WT Kendall, with the latter establishing the first Australian veterinary school in Melbourne in 1886. Despite some early difficulties, not least with the British Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons over recognition of its graduates, the school survived to become a part of the University of Melbourne in 1908. However, the difficulties faced by professional veterinarians in Australia in finding employment or establishing viable practices continued into the new century.

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