

Recent trends in the development of the Australian veterinary profession

The last fifty years have seen remarkable changes in the fortunes of the veterinary profession. Against a background of sustained economic growth, leading to the full development of a 'consumer society' in Australia, the profession has both grown and changed in fundamental ways.

In 1945, a professional veterinary education was available in only one Australian university. By the end of the century, it was available in all mainland States except South Australia. The Melbourne school was re-established in 1960 while veterinary science was also prominent at the Australian National University in Canberra. The curriculum has also expanded dramatically to take account not only of continuing rapid advance in scientific research and knowledge, but also of the changing orientation of professional practice.

The traditional focus of the veterinary profession was on livestock production. This has shifted as the importance of companion animals has grown with affluence, for clients and for the new generations of putative veterinarians. From a position where the profession attracted very few new entrants, in past decades it has almost been overwhelmed by them. The entry requirements for veterinary faculties have become among the highest – if not the highest – in Australian universities. Another feature has been the steady increase in female applicants for a veterinary education. With over three-quarters of undergraduates now female, the profession is rapidly in the process of being feminised.

These features reflect the fundamental shift in attitudes towards animals that is a feature of modern society. The shift has presented unprecedented opportunities and challenges for the veterinary profession. Traditionally, while it emphasised its role in enhancing animal welfare, this was as a basis for enhancing the productivity of livestock industries. Today, questions have been raised concerning the ability of the profession to provide adequate services in this respect, while the focus of the role of the profession is shifting towards the primacy of animal welfare in its own right. It can be predicted that the issue of animal rights as much as animal welfare will be a major preoccupation in the new millennium.

John Fisher
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