
Women are dominating the veterinary industry, but discrimination remains alive and well

By Kerri Duncan

Dr Elizabeth Riley embraces some of the unusual challenges of her job.

“Getting bitten or scratched is a fortnightly ordeal. I’ve been known to hide a retch while draining a cattle abscess!”

A love for helping animals and connecting with their people is what motivated Dr Riley to tackle the 5-7 years of university training required to become a veterinarian.

“I enjoy the impact of saving a life in critical conditions and being able to problem solve to get to an answer. Baby animal cuddles and bringing new life into the world is a bonus.”

The 33-year-old locum is one of the thousands of Australian women who have contributed to the ‘feminisation’ of the veterinary industry over the last decade, which has seen a steep rise in women entering the previously male-dominated workforce.

But despite no longer being outnumbered, many women like Dr Riley continue to report cases of sexism, discrimination and barriers to progressing to higher positions.

“My direct boss has made comments that it’s a downfall having less men,” says Dr Patricia Lensworth, a small animal veterinarian based in Adelaide.

A recent survey by the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) found that 67% of Australian veterinarians identified as female in 2018, up from 57% in 2012. Back in 1958, only 7.7% of veterinary science students were women.

As more young women enter the veterinary workforce, the majority of senior positions remain occupied by older men of previous generations. While there are more women overall, they largely occupy younger age brackets and more junior positions. With the absence of advanced female mentors and balanced leadership roles, younger female veterinarians often say they struggle to receive the same level of respect as their male counterparts.

“The boys often get embraced by the old boys’ vet clubs much easier than females,” says Dr Riley. “It helps if you have a balanced female leading, but at the moment they are few and far between.”

The gender pay gap still remains a heated topic. The AVA survey found that 53% of male veterinarians earned over \$100,000 per year in 2018 compared with only 23% of females. While this was partly attributed to more males holding senior positions, veterinarians report an ongoing gender bias when it comes to the salaries of equally qualified professionals.

The CEO of Diversity Council Australia, Lisa Annese, explains how “the gender pay gap includes direct discrimination as well as indirect factors such as unconscious bias.”

Dr Andrew Brown, a male small animal veterinarian, says he has witnessed the issue first-hand. “I’ve seen less experienced males being paid more or equal to female vets, and getting treated harsher by bosses.”

Dr Riley claims her male partner, also a veterinarian, is sought out and offered prime positions, even when he's less qualified for the role. "He is headhunted, even with less clinical experience... He sees it too, the way he gets treated versus females... The boys are a gold nugget to clinics."

"The assumption is that all women want kids, which means they're assumed to be less reliable," Dr Lensworth claims. Dr Brown agrees that family commitments are still a contributing factor to discrimination. "Most bosses in the vet world hire male vets because of the maternity leave issue. Female vets are more commonly wanting part-time hours after kids which is hard when most businesses are understaffed."

Understaffing, financial pressures and high stress levels are frequently cited problems in the industry. The AVA reports practice owners, both rural and urban, are finding it increasingly difficult to hire and retain veterinary staff. "Lack of staff and high caseloads can lead to burn-out and stress in short-staffed practices where veterinarians are required to do extra shifts and long hours to service their patients and clients."

"Client and industry expectations are huge compared to the reality of what a standard person can provide," says Dr Riley.

While veterinary university fees are the same or higher than similar professionals such as doctors and dentists, their incomes are significantly lower. "This means vets graduate with significant debt which takes a long time to pay off on relatively low wages, and this financial stress may become a disincentive to remain in the veterinary workforce, especially when coupled with other workplace stressors," says the AVA.

"Results from the survey show that 20% of those currently working as veterinarians were considering not working as a veterinarian in the following year."

Emotional stress and compassion fatigue were some of the major workplace stressors highlighted by the survey. Difficult client interactions and a lack of superior support were commonly reported challenges by both sexes, which may further compound the strains felt by vets experiencing discrimination.

"I find some people's attitude towards animals challenging and difficult to navigate for the best interest of the animal. Some people are very dependent and overly attached, while others are the opposite. It can bring a lot of pressure or distress to the situation," says Dr Riley.

Reporting clients to the RSPCA for cruelty or neglect can be a painful necessity for Dr Lensworth. "No one likes having to do this, and it can be tolling when someone refuses treatment and won't surrender or euthanise, and you have to tell them you will report them. Sometimes you have to be brave and do it in front of their children for instance, which can be hard. It's hard knowing a patient may be suffering while you wait for that process to happen also."

Many vets say that women are becoming more requested by clients, often claiming them to display more empathy.

"A lot of younger people especially actually request female vets," says Dr Lensworth. "Given pets have shifted from outside animals to essentially 'fur babies' in the last 20 years, people want someone who cares."

Dr Brown says "customers more frequently request female vets for behaviour reasons than males in my experience."

Dr Riley explains how some clients still display preconceived attitudes towards women's roles. "I quickly learned to make a point of introducing myself as 'Liz - one of the vets,' to avoid any assumptions," she says of being mistaken for a nurse or receptionist. "I've taken male students with me [to large animal

consultations] and clients would speak with him even after I've said I'm the vet. Lots of farmers have told me to 'speak to one of the boys', obviously questioning my judgement."

Dr Lensworth has noticed the opposite effect for men. "Clients often assumed our previous male nurse was the vet, and called him 'doctor' without any introductions."

"But the sexism and misogyny I've encountered from a landlord vet outweighs anything I've experienced in my life," she says. He was reportedly reluctant to sell his clinic to female vets. She claims to have overheard the landlord say: "Those women wouldn't know what hard work is, they just want a cushy girls club. A male vet would be prepared to give it his all."

Similar issues are being reported from the UK. The British Veterinary Association (BVA) partnered with the University of Exeter to conduct a study in which veterinary employers, partners and managers were asked to review one of two performance evaluations of (fictional) vets. These performance evaluations were identical except for one subtle difference - one vet was named "Mark," the other "Elizabeth." The participants were asked to comment on how competent the vet seemed to be, how likely they were to hire them, and what salary they would advise.

Another key question was incorporated into the study - whether or not they believed discrimination against women was still a problem in the veterinary industry.

"The results of our experiment demonstrated there were indeed differences in how respondents said they would perceive, treat, and pay "Mark" versus "Elizabeth." However, these differences were only systematically evident among those who believed women in the profession no longer face discrimination," the study reports.

Those who most strongly believed female vets no longer experience discrimination offered "Mark" the highest salary over "Elizabeth."

"Importantly, while this pay disparity was largest among those who were most confident that women in the profession no longer experience discrimination, even those who were generally indifferent or uncertain about this issue tended to pay "Mark" more than "Elizabeth."

"Those who believed female vets no longer experience discrimination also believed "Mark" was significantly more competent than "Elizabeth."

These unfounded perceptions of competency had a knock-on effect on the likelihood of career-advancing opportunities for the vet, according to the study. "Mark" was more likely to be allowed to take on managerial responsibilities, be encouraged to seek promotions, and be referred to as a source of knowledge to fellow vets.

"Even when everything about two vets is equal, their gender can still significantly impact upon how they are perceived, treated, and paid."

"Gender inequality and discrimination in the veterinary profession is alive and well, albeit sometimes subtle," the report concludes.

All of these issues seem to be contributing to a disturbing underlying trend - the industry continues to face a growing mental health crisis.

The AVA reports that Australian veterinarians are now up to four times more likely to fall victim to suicide than the general population. Comparatively, healthcare professionals such as doctors, pharmacists, dentists and nurses are around twice as likely.

In other words, an average of one Australian vet will die of suicide every twelve weeks, according to the statistics.

Some independent campaigns have been set up in response to these shocking figures. "Love Your Pet Love Your Vet" is a registered Australian charity founded in 2017 by Dr Nadine Hamilton, a psychologist and expert on veterinary wellbeing. She won the Blackmores Mercie Whellan Women+Wellbeing Award in 2020, and has published a best-selling book "Coping with Stress and Burnout as a Veterinarian," based on six years of research into veterinary wellbeing.

"Not One More Vet" (NOMV) is a high-profile US-based Facebook forum started by Dr Nicole McArthur in 2014, following the suicide of world-renowned vet Dr Sophia Yin. What began as a private group to discuss the "good, bad and the ugly" sides of their profession, it has now grown to welcome over 26,000 members worldwide.

NOMV aims to "transform the status of mental wellness within the profession so veterinary professionals can survive and thrive through education, resources and support," according to the website's mission statement.

So what more can be done to help improve the problems of discrimination and related mental health issues among vets?

The AVA has a few ideas. They are already collaborating with the University of Exeter to run a study on gender discrimination mimicking the British one, but in an Australian context. They hope to investigate how all junior vets are evaluated and treated by managers, to better understand underlying issues.

Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins has also called on employers, alongside proposed changes to regulatory systems, to help create gender-equal workplaces in her 2020 Respect@Work report. "It will... require a shift from the current reactive model, that requires complaints from individuals, to a proactive model, which will require positive actions from employers."

The BVA suggests there is a need to focus on educating vets and employers to dispel a common belief - that just because the industry has a greater representation of women, it doesn't mean gender bias is gone.

"Those who mistakenly think gender bias is no longer an issue become the highest risk for perpetuating it."

Further education regarding mental health and resilience could be incorporated into veterinary schooling. The AVA is working on further developing resources to support veterinary staff, such as the graduate mentoring program for one-on-one advice, mental health first aid training, and free telephone counselling services.

Providing support for higher education fees, reviewing the veterinary award and encouraging public uptake of pet insurance could reduce financial pressures, short-staffing, and resulting attrition levels according to the AVA. This could in turn lessen the pressures around maternity leave and work-life balance.

"I think there is room for everyone... but it will take time and changes to business models especially with mainly female vets coming through," says Dr Riley.

"Reality is, we will have a large female bias in our industry and a lot of people will have kids so we need to learn to have different structures to accommodate that."

Dr Riley says she remains optimistic about the future of the veterinary industry, despite the challenges she has faced so far.

“It’s exciting because we will have some balanced female leaders coming through to mentor and support the younger generation. So I see change happening.”

**Dr Elizabeth Riley, Dr Patricia Lensworth and Dr Andrew Brown’s names have been changed to protect their privacy.*

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