



VETERINARY SURGEONS BOARD OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

VSB SA • PO BOX 218 • WALKERVILLE SA 5081

PHONE: 08 8269 3216 • FAX: 08 8342 5325

WEBSITE: www.vsbsa.org.au E-MAIL: admin@vsbsa.org.au

RESULTS OF SURVEY OF PROFESSION

July 2008

The Board thanks all members of the profession who took the time to complete the Survey. Your comments have provided valuable feedback to the Board which will inform its future considerations. This report on the Survey is structured with an Overview of the Survey respondents, and then each question is followed by a summary of the responses received. After each question, if relevant, a comment or points of clarification from the Board on the issue is included (Board comments are all noted in italics).

The Survey was distributed to all registered veterinarians in South Australia, including primary, secondary, limited, and non-practising vets. It went to 658 vets, some of whom were located outside South Australia (e.g. secondary vets, and some primary and non-practising vets who may be overseas). The survey was also posted on-line on the Board's website, enabling it to be returned either by post or on-line.

- 49 surveys were returned by post.
- 22 were returned on-line.

Total responses received were 71. This represents a response rate of 10.8% which would be considered a reasonable response (15% is generally considered a good response rate). This enables the survey results to have some validity in relation to the views across the profession.

Of these 71 responses, the responders were broken down as follows:

Country/Metropolitan base

Metropolitan vets	31	----- Average years of practice----	22.5 years
Country vets	31	----- Average years of practice----	17.0 years
Did not indicate	9		

The average number of years of practice for all responders ---- 19.75 years

Category of registration

Primary vets	54
Secondary vets	8
Limited	1
Non-practising	3
Did not indicate	5

In relation to the responders, there was unsurprisingly a clear bias towards primary registrants. However, it is interesting that as many country vets responded as metropolitan vets. This response rate is significantly disproportionate to the number of vets in rural SA (178 compared to 370 in the metropolitan area). The average age of responders is also of interest with younger practitioners tending not to complete the survey, even though it was available on-line. The results of the survey should be read with these parameters in mind.



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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

Questions 1 and 2: Multiple-choice questions on the role of the Board and its communication with the profession.

Responders were asked to rate the Board's performance in undertaking its role over the last 2 years, and to rate the way the Board communicates with the profession. The following table resulted:

Questions 1 and 2	Don't know - don't have a view	Inadequate	Adequate	Average	Good	Very Good	Did not respond
Question 1: Role							
Maintaining or improving practice standards	13 18.3%	6 8.4%	13 18.3%	6 8.4%	26 36.6%	5 7.0%	2 2.8%
Registration	7 9.8%	4 5.6%	10 14.1%	4 5.6%	24 33.8%	21 29.6%	1 1.4%
Protecting the public interest	12 16.9%	5 7.0%	9 12.7%	10 14.1%	21 29.6%	11 15.5%	3 4.2%
Fostering the welfare of animals	12 16.9%	5 7.0%	10 14.1%	9 12.7%	27 38%	6 8.4%	2 2.8%
Question 2: Communication							
Newsletter	3 4.2%	4 5.6%	14 19.7%	13 18.3%	26 36.6%	11 15.5%	0
Website	29 40.8%	1 1.4%	9 12.7%	9 12.7%	13 18.3%	4 5.6%	6 8.4%
Annual Reports	8 11.2%	0	12 16.9%	14 19.7%	31 43.7%	5 7.0%	1 1.4%
Professional Meetings	17 23.9%	6 8.4%	14 19.7%	12 16.9%	16 22.5%	4 5.6%	2 2.8%

Analysis:

If the responses which did not have view/didn't know, and those who did not respond, are removed (i.e. the first and last columns above), the following results:

Question 1: Roles of the Board

Role	Inadequate - %	Adequate and Average - %	Good or Very Good - %
Maintaining standards	8.4	26.7	43.7
Registration	5.6	19.7	63.4
Protecting the public interest	7.0	26.8	45.1
Fostering the welfare of animals	7.0	26.8	46.4



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Question 2: Communication

Medium	Inadequate - %	Adequate and Average - %	Good or Very Good - %
Newsletters	5.6	38.0	52.1
Website	1.4	25.4	23.9
Annual Reports	-	36.6	53.7
Meetings with the profession	8.4	36.6	28.1

Question 3. Have you any suggestions on how the Board can improve its communication with the profession. For example, do you have a preference for more information in the Newsletter or on the Website on recent complaints, current issues, national matters, guidelines/ Board meetings, suggestions to improve the Annual Report, or have any other suggestions for methods of communication.

A total of 24 or 33.8% of respondents commented. The following summarises the comments according to general themes.

General:

- Any updated / new / changes to the Guidelines should be published and forwarded to all veterinarians. The reference in the previous newsletter to changes to the Guidelines and a web address is probably inadequate, as most vets (almost all) won't actually take the next step to look up the changes. Disappointed also that the board hasn't made any reference to the AVA's mediation process now available in South Australia.
- fostering the welfare of animals - not really in VSB ambit? except secondarily. more information on specific case complaints (privacy protected of course) so people can see how it might affect them

Communication:

- mail & email has been adequate. the Board could play a role in notification of vacancies or list people looking for work. it could be a passive function on the website with security access
- more communication on complaints & issues occurring within the profession to keep the profession informed
- more telephone availability
- electronic communication should be the way to go

Newsletters:

- more frequent newsletters - this current one is good - short, to the point & interesting reading about complaints. maybe an explanation why 66% of complaints come to nothing!
- emailing out news, either breaking news or just touching base news, every now and then
- more frequent newsletters
- continue hard copy newsletters

Website:

- Encourage people to go on the website - many don't think about it. Website is accessible to most, is cheap to administer and can be kept up to date



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Professional meetings:

- regular meetings with the profession in conjunction with other professional events
- make presentations to SIGs at their regular meetings as has been recent practice
- on line meetings such as the vet education series. 1. great for country vets - distance/time 2. environmentally friendly - no oil used
- rural meetings outside adelaide very useful

Board comments

The Board has decided to increase the number of newsletters each year – from 2 editions per year to 3. Case studies will continue to be included in each newsletter, and the next newsletter will have a specific focus on complaints as there is a clear interest on this topic (case studies; complaint process etc). The Board will continue to encourage the use of the website as a communication tool – for the reason fed back in the survey. It is a cost effective means of communication, and is kept up to date with all current Guidelines, information and news items.

The legislation under which the Board operates is the Veterinary Practice Act 2003. It identifies that the Board has a role to promote animal welfare. It is therefore one of a number of considerations the Board takes into account when assessing complaints. It is also the reason why a member of the Board must be a layperson with a specific interest in animal welfare. The Act also requires that the Board investigates all complaints. As such it is not appropriate for the Board to refer complaints to the AVA mediation process. To do this would be against the Veterinary Practice Act, and lead to claims that the Board was not acting in the public interest.

The Office hours are from 10 am – 4 pm each week day. The Office is manned by one person during these hours. With other regular duties to attend (e.g. banking, posting etc) there are times during these hours when the no-one is in the office to take your call. If your telephone call is not answered, please leave a message and it will be returned as soon as possible. If your call is urgent, you can ring 0419 826 389 anytime.

The Office keeps an email list for veterinarians. Its currency depends on vets keeping us updated with current email addresses, so please also let us know when you change your email address.

Question 4. How often do you visit the Board's website

Not Ever	Rarely (< 12 months)	Once every 3-6 months	Once every 4-12 weeks	Once every 2-4 weeks	Very Often
22 31.0%	24 33.8%	19 26.8%	5 7.0%	1 1.4%	-

Board comments

We strongly encourage vets to visit the website regularly. All Guidelines, Standards, Codes of Practice and other relevant material (newsletters, annual reports etc) are on the website. It is also updated with news items when relevant. A new page will soon be included on the website. With the interest of the profession in case studies, the new page will be a collection of all complaints which have formed the basis of case studies and been published in past newsletters.



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Question 5. Do you think the Board's complaint handing process could be improved. If so, please make suggestions.

No: 32
Yes: 18
Did not respond: 21

27 respondents – 38.0% - provided comments on the complaint handling process. A summary of the comments received follows:

10 - indicated no opinion, or did not know

2 - comments supported the Board's role in the handling complaints

1 - general comment was that animal lovers should be members of the Board

14 - comments were critical about some element of the complaint process. These are summarized below:

- the process need to be more veterinary friendly
- the Board needs to be more visible to the public
- if a finding is in favour of the veterinarian, the Board should recommend the client pay the bill
- the standard of the veterinary facilities should be considered by the Board in complaint handling
- delays in handling complaints should be avoided
- frivolous complaints should be screened out
- responding to complaints is time consuming and stressful - there could be an informal assessment of the complaint before a full investigation
- the public always have the first run on the Board concerning a complaint. may i suggest that although our profession is always on the second run we be given equal consideration
- "Everyday" complaints handled well, serious complaints not dealt with adequately
- There should be some form of support of new graduates or inexperienced vets that have to go through this process

Board comments

The Board recognises this is a difficult area for all parties involved. Its primary role is to consider all aspects of each complaint, and to ensure it navigates a course where it maintains the confidence of both the profession which it regulates (so that standards are maintained), and the broader community. When considering individual complaints, it takes a range of factors into account. The over-riding objective is to prevent a similar complaint arising in future rather than taking a punitive approach. The next newsletter will be devoted to complaints and the complaints process, including screening of complaints, accounts and fees, frivolous complaints, and investigation procedures.

Question 6: Do you have any suggestions on how the Board can improve its services to the profession – e.g. registration process; convening professional meetings - on topics of interest; promoting the role of the profession; etc.



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Registration

26 responses received. The overwhelming issue was support for national registration (17). Other comments were that the registration process is handled well (6); registration fees could be cheaper (1); more vets are needed (1); registration should be available on-line (1).

Board comments

The model for national recognition of registration has been approved by all States and Territories. It now requires all States and Territories to amend their legislation. South Australia is moving in this direction, with amendments being drafted to enable primary and specialist veterinarians registered in other states and territories to be 'deemed' to be registered in this State. Other states are also taking action on this. Renewal of registration is available on-line; initial registration is not available because accompanying (duly authorized) documents are required to support the application. Registration fees are in the mid-range of other States/Territories. National registration will mean that SA will lose approximately 12% of its income (from secondary registration, Letters of Good Standing).

Convening professional meetings

18 responses received. 2 commented that this was not the role of the Board. The remaining 16 comments supported this direction. Suggestions for topics included – legal and ethical issues; veterinary hospitals; handover/exiting a practice; more than just small animal topics. Some of these also commented that meetings should be held in conjunction with AVA events; other suggested more regional meetings or 'on-line' meetings; two comments supported the Annual Oration.

Board comments

In the last 3 years, the Board has convened one professional meeting each year with the profession. It is likely to continue with this approach (given its current resources), alternating between meetings convened in Adelaide, and meetings in a regional location. Other meetings may be convened if there is a need to discuss Board related matters. The Board has also initiated the L B Bull Oration in 2008. This is intended as an annual event for members of the profession. CPD points accrue for all meetings convened by the Board (including the Oration). The Board considers it has a role to meet with the profession on professional issues, as distinct from providing continuing education on clinical or related topics. It recognises and supports the AVA role in this area of education.

Promoting the profession

15 comments were received. 4 commented this was not the role of the Board. Other comments were varied, and included the following: that the Board needs to set a standard for professional conduct; it could develop a survey for the public on their expectations of the profession and the standard they expect; the Board should take action against lay operators; the Board should be pro-active with the media and promote the profession to the public; the Board should be more pro-active in deregistering vets found guilty of unprofessional conduct; the Board should address the gender balance of the profession.



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Other general comments

4 comments were received. These were

1. fees are excessive
2. Maybe the Board needs better funding, but maybe sometimes the Board has been too slow taking action after Hearings - not a funding problem, more a "busy doing other things" problem
3. Take over the role of the AVA
4. Maintain regular communication

Question 7: Do you have any other comments or suggestions to make about the Board and its role

20 comments were received. 3 of these comments supported national registration, and 3 supported the Board's Newsletters (one also suggested contact details for all Board members on each newsletter). The remaining comments were varied, as follows:

1. I've been disappointed to notice that the vet industry (in general) is nervous to report disreputable or even unethical vet behaviour.
2. As a general comment about all Boards it seems some colleagues who have done some bad things appear to be leniently disciplined (esp if they argue their case strongly). Not sure why the Dept Env & Heritage has a role in animal welfare. Would not PIRSA have more expertise in this. I would like to see more vets on Boards (with a minority of lay people). The reason is that there have been Board decisions in the past which were technically wrong (this is only a general comment on all Australian Boards).
3. there is a place for simple & good honest veterinary practice - i think we are going to "glitzy"
4. how does the Board promote CE for rural practitioners?
5. phone conferences were great. forget the video links - they never worked properly. keep to audio, email powerpoint presentation, phone link-up. great for rural & city practitioners alike, cheap to run, sponsorship from manufacturers
6. the Board no longer seems to have an aggressive attitude stimulating a flow of complaints. they are obviously being smoothed out rather than being encouraged
7. stress code of ethics to members especially new graduates
8. you have a difficult and often thankless task. i complement you on the sacrifices you make as members & the manner in which you act. this questionnaire is an excellent idea
9. i have been involved in cases 3 times in 5 years, in each as a second party but prepared to take responsibility. each time i have found final reports convenient and lacking objectivity - at least in part
10. need to work closer with vet schools to get more vets. less overseas training, more local training - presently we are de-skilling australia
11. overall my experience with the Board has been very positive
12. very difficult to make a right statement. as an ex v.o. and now pensioner i'm not any more so much involved to answer questions, partic. 3 onwards
13. I marked Qu 1 (3) as adequate because it is difficult to judge the public interest some of the public expect all the bells and whistles but much of the public want reasonable service and cost. For instance the newsletter implies that the board expects pre-anaesthetic tests as a normal (page 2 "record keeping"). Personally I do not believe in pathology unless there are clinical signs suggesting a need. Perhaps in the last 10 years I have had 5 or 6 possible anaesthetic deaths, perhaps 1/2 of those



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might have been avoided with a routine pre-anaesthetic blood test. In 10 years I would have given approximately 10,000 anaesthetics. Is the Board implying that I should have charged the public another \$500,000 to \$600,000 in that time to avoid a very small risk. I think that would not be in the public interest. In the same vein I think that it is un-professional for practices to be asking members of the public to choose between anaesthetic a, b and c with an implication that to choose the less expensive option is to be putting their pet at risk. The vet should be using the anaesthetic that he or she believes is most appropriate for the case. I have always believed that the Board's prime responsibility is to the public not to the profession but these are difficult competitive times in this profession and there are strong pressures on vets to build their business, to maximise the return from every person that walks through the door, and this makes it hard for the board because it is under pressure from the "top end of town practices" to declare that their attitudes are correct and that practices servicing clients with lower expectations are wrong.

14. It is a shame the Board often appears to be a paper tiger, and does not act when very good evidence is given at a Hearing.

Board comments

The Board has 7 members; 4 are veterinarians and 3 are lay members (including the Presiding Officer who must be a legal practitioner; and one lay member with a specific interest in animal welfare). As noted above, the Board is not responsible for providing continuing education for vets – nor does it have the resources to do so. This is a key role for the AVA rather than the Board. However, the Board is responsible for ensuring veterinarians undertake the required amount of professional development, as required by the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 (i.e. 60 units over 3 years).

The Board is working with the University of Adelaide to support students in their clinical practice. The Board must be guided in the registration of overseas graduates by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council, which accredits veterinary schools recognized for automatic registration in Australia. Disciplinary tribunals are similar to legal court proceedings, where evidence is presented under oath by all parties. The rules of evidence apply and the Tribunal must always proceed being mindful of procedural fairness. The Board has recently become more closely connected with the Council of Australasian Tribunals (COAT) to improve its Tribunal process, so that it is robust and effective.

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