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COUNTRY VET SHORTAGE REACHING CRITICAL CONDITION

A shortage of veterinarians (vets) in regional Australia is affecting a large section of the community and industry who can't speak for themselves – animals. However, the key to stabilising the worsening condition of a vet shortage in regional Australia is the next generation of vets – with intervention and support from government.

"Household pets, other domestic animals, wildlife and animals from Australia's backbone industry – agriculture – are at a heightened risk from diminishing and overstretched regionally based animal healthcare providers," said leading Dubbo veterinary surgeon and vet advocate, Dr Duncan McGinness. "As an established and older generation of vets begin to transition out of the industry, more and more areas across Australia are seeing vet shortages."

Duncan McGinness has practised veterinary medicine for 36 years and acknowledges the pressure on the 'health system' is not just limited to humans. Animals – and their owners – are now faced with a vet shortage in regional areas, in a time where veterinary science faces immense demand, fuelled by rapidly increasing populations in regional areas, increasing demand for vets from industry (such as agriculture), and increasing demands on vets to play frontline roles in Australia's ongoing natural disasters, and biosecurity defence – such as treating animals during disease outbreaks, or playing a key role in outbreak prevention.

"It's not a profession that is widely covered in things like pop culture," said Dr McGinness. "It's not as if recent TV shows or movies have seen a surge of people study veterinary science. But those who have taken up the challenge of study are finding themselves waylaid with education costs or limited by a belief they must practise veterinary medicine in a city environment. The country offers a greater range of veterinary clinical challenges and can be a real turbo charge for an emerging vet's career simply by the breadth and depth of clinical demands placed on skills."

"Yes, cost of living is high and getting higher. However, living in regional areas provides significantly more flexibility – ideal for vets entering the workforce, or vets who've gained skills in the city but want greater clinical challenges without the added burden paying for a life in the city to pursue their careers."

Dr McGinness and other veterinary practices across Dubbo and the Central West recently hosted 40 student vets from Charles Sturt University and Sydney University. It was an opportunity for students to see what clinical challenges await them should they choose country over city, while at the same time providing the students with a taste of country-living. Places like Dubbo, one of the largest inland cities in regional NSW, offer the added advantage of 'city vet medicine' with the benefits of a 'country lifestyle and cost of living'.

"Where government can play a leading role in tackling this other little known 'health emergency' is through successful programs like New Zealand's Voluntary Bonding Scheme (VBS)," said Dr McGinness. "The scheme offers a grant spread over 5 years to attract and retain graduate vets into rural practices. In New Zealand, Graduates taking part in the scheme are eligible for \$55,000 before tax (\$11,000 each year) over the 5 years of the scheme. The government pays the first instalment of \$33,000 after completing the third year, \$11,000 in the fourth and the fifth year. It's not a leap into the unknown given government already has incentive programs like this for doctors practicing human medicine, and similar schemes for other professions across various industries with the sole purpose of attracting people to regional areas and retaining them because of skills shortages."

"Skilled migration is also another key area where government's involvement is critical. There are several countries around the world whose veterinary medicine practices and qualifications closely match – even surpass – ours, and we've got a great opportunity to bridge the shortfall in vet numbers that universities can't keep up with."

"There is an emerging veterinary medicine health crisis in this country," said Dr McGinness. "Vets across regional Australia are doing their part to address this. Universities that offer veterinary science are doing their part too. We need help to raise awareness of this crisis and get vets to country areas so we can continue to provide that specialised healthcare to all creatures – great and small." **ENDS**