



# National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework Interim Report

Submission of the  
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

July 2025

## About the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

*The AVA is the peak professional body representing veterinary professionals and students across Australia. For more than 100 years we have been the united voice of the veterinary profession.*

*Veterinarians are among Australia's most trusted and respected professionals, dedicated to safeguarding animal health and welfare and supporting the communities they live in.*

*Our vision and purpose*

**Vision** *A thriving veterinary profession*

**Purpose** *Building a vibrant future for veterinary professionals.*

*At the AVA we champion the veterinary community, advance professional excellence, foster connectivity, and deliver exceptional member experiences to achieve our vision of a thriving profession.*

*Essential role of the veterinary profession*

*Veterinary services are essential to Australia's animal health, food security, and economy. They help secure Australia's animal health and livestock supply chain, protecting hundreds of thousands of jobs and easing cost of living pressures through a safe and reliable food supply.*

*Beyond agriculture, veterinarians support companion animals and their owners, strengthening the human-animal bond and promoting the associated mental and physical health benefits of pet ownership. Animals are not just a part of the Australian way of life; they are deeply embedded in it - socially, culturally, environmentally, and economically, and veterinarians are an essential part of every vibrant Australian community.*

*Veterinarians play a pivotal role in maintaining the social licence of animal industries, ensuring animal health and welfare meets community expectations. Like human healthcare and education, veterinary services provide both private benefits to individuals and critical public benefits to society, in areas like biosecurity surveillance, wildlife treatment and health and emergency animal disease management.*

*Recognised among Australia's most ethical and trusted professionals, veterinarians are highly respected and trusted members of their communities. The Governance Institute of Australia's 2023 Ethics Index ranked veterinarians among the nation's top 10 ethical occupations*

## Introduction

The AVA welcomes the Productivity Commission's interim report on the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (NMHSPA) and supports the continued emphasis on integration, co-design, improved governance, and tailored supports.



However, we remain concerned by the absence of explicit recognition of high-risk professional groups, such as veterinarians. The Commission's interim report rightly identifies structural gaps in service design, psychosocial support, and data collection - but it misses an opportunity to identify workforce cohorts with unique exposure to mental ill-health.

Veterinary professionals experience higher rates of suicide, burnout, and psychological distress than the general population, and many face significant barriers to help-seeking. These challenges require tailored, evidence-informed responses, aligned with the draft recommendations in the interim report.

## Key Areas of Relevance in the Interim Report

### *1. Tailored Supports for High-Risk Groups*

#### **Relevant to: Draft Recommendation 4.5 and 4.12**

Veterinary professionals continue to fall through the cracks of the mental health system. Many do not qualify for the NDIS but need ongoing psychosocial support due to chronic distress, neurodivergence, or occupational trauma. Improved access to Medicare-funded psychology sessions and clearer psychosocial support pathways are essential, particularly for new graduates and veterinary nurses on low incomes.

We strongly support Draft Recommendation 4.5 (clarifying psychosocial supports responsibilities) and 4.12 (routinely collecting mental health and wellbeing data). However, we urge the Commission to recognise **occupational groups** such as veterinarians as relevant categories for both planning and data capture.

### *2. Access Barriers in Rural and Regional Settings*

#### **Relevant to: Draft Recommendations 4.1, 4.5, 4.13**

Veterinarians in rural and regional areas face compounded challenges - limited access to GPs, no availability of telehealth-compatible spaces, long waitlists, and stigma related to help-seeking. Draft Recommendation 4.13 supports flexible local commissioning through PHNs, which the AVA supports, but we recommend explicitly directing PHNs to consider occupational isolation and mental health access barriers for essential but small workforces like veterinary professionals.

These barriers particularly affect young professionals who relocate for their first jobs and have no established healthcare relationships. The agreement must consider how to provide early intervention and continuity of care under these circumstances.



### **3. Stigma, Licensing Risk and Discrimination**

#### **Relevant to: Draft Recommendation 2.1**

Stigma remains a significant barrier to help-seeking. Veterinarians report reluctance to disclose mental health concerns due to fear of career repercussions, loss of professional registration, and confidentiality risks - especially in rural areas. These concerns are not theoretical: they are cited regularly by AVA members as reasons for avoiding professional support.

We support the implementation of a national stigma and discrimination reduction strategy and urge that it explicitly consider regulated professions. Existing laws and professional standards must be reviewed to ensure disclosure does not compromise licensing unfairly or discourage necessary mental healthcare.

### **4. Peer Support and Sector-Led Solutions**

#### **Relevant to: Draft Recommendation 4.14**

Veterinary professionals benefit from structured, evidence-informed peer support—something the AVA has built into our THRIVE Framework. We welcome the recommendation to develop a national scope of practice for the peer workforce and encourage consideration of informal or sector-based peer networks as part of this framework.

Not One More Vet (US) offers an example of a combined professional psychological support and peer mentoring program. In Australia, AVA's "Cultivating Safe Teams" initiative, as well as our mentoring programs, could be scaled and strengthened with formal government support.

We would welcome further engagement on this point as the Commission explores how best to support the peer workforce across regulated professions.

### **Additional Observations from the Profession**

Drawing on member input and internal wellness networks, we note the following observations in response to the interim report:

- Veterinary professionals often lack access to GPs in regional areas, creating significant obstacles for initiating Mental Health Care Plans.
- New graduates and support staff are particularly at risk due to low incomes, housing instability, and limited access to subsidised care.
- Many veterinary professionals identify as neurodiverse but do not meet NDIS criteria. Psychosocial support must be made more broadly accessible.



- There is strong interest within the profession in workplace-based mental health prevention—not just reactive care. Government funding and policy should extend to strategies that address social determinants of health (e.g. job insecurity, gender inequality, professional isolation).
- Workforce sustainability and wellbeing should be considered side by side. Early interventions can prevent burnout and retention issues downstream.

## Summary of Recommendations

The AVA respectfully recommends the following:

- **Explicitly include veterinarians and the veterinary team as a high-risk occupational cohort** in the next iteration of the NMHSPA.
- **Integrate veterinary professionals into psychosocial support planning**, particularly in rural commissioning.
- **Remove barriers to accessing mental health support** by improving telehealth, Medicare coverage, and non-GP pathways.
- **Strengthen data collection and accountability**, including occupational-level insights into mental health outcomes and suicide prevention.
- **Support sector-led peer mentoring and mental health initiatives**, building on programs like THRIVE and “Cultivating Safe Teams.”
- **Ensure stigma reduction efforts include regulated professions**, addressing the fears many veterinary professionals have around disclosing mental ill-health.

## Conclusion

Veterinarians provide essential services to the Australian community, yet continue to experience an outsized mental health burden. While the interim report presents many promising draft recommendations, these must translate into meaningful improvements for smaller, high-risk professional groups.

The AVA remains committed to engaging with the Commission and working with government to ensure no occupation is left behind in national mental health reform.



## Contact

[publicvetaffairs@ava.com.au](mailto:publicvetaffairs@ava.com.au)