

# MIND THE GAP

We can't hide from the numbers—female vets are paid less than male vets, which threatens the earning potential of the entire profession. What can practices do to close the gender pay gap? By **Angela Tufvesson**

**It is a fact that Australian women** earn less than Australian men in every profession. So profound and insidious is the gender pay gap across our wide brown land that, according to the latest statistics from the ATO, women working as accountants, surgeons, waiters, firefighters, nurses and every occupation in between receive smaller pay cheques than their male counterparts—including female veterinarians.

With veterinary medicine continuing to undergo a dramatic, rapid feminisation, allowing the gender pay gap to persist, or widen, puts the entire profession at risk of lower overall salaries—and devalues the contribution of the majority of its workforce.

## Get the facts

Australia's gender pay gap is 14.2 per cent, which means women earn about \$261 per week less than men—or more than \$13,500 each year. The ATO figures show the gap is even larger in veterinary science, with female vets earning an average of \$78,176 annually compared to \$112,950 for male vets.

The Australian Veterinary Workforce Survey 2018, the most recent of the surveys published by the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) to include remuneration data by gender, found 53 per cent of males earned more than \$100,000 a year compared with 23 per cent of females—up from a paltry 17 per cent in 2016.

Similar patterns are observed in the UK, US and other developed countries, explains Professor Josh Slater, head of Veterinary Clinical Sciences at the University of Melbourne's Melbourne Veterinary School. And even though female graduates of veterinary science degrees now outnumber male graduates by a considerable margin, he says the gender pay gap begins straight after university.

"Across the board, you've got a five to 10 per cent pay gap in the first few years in the profession, which grows to a 20 or 30 per cent or sometimes greater pay gap within more specialised and more senior roles," Professor Slater says.

## Understanding the gap

The gender pay gap measures the difference between the average earnings of women and men in the workforce. It's the result of social and economic factors that combine to reduce women's earning capacity over time. Crucially, it's not the difference between two



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people being paid differently for the same work, although unequal pay is a symptom of the problem.

Indeed, a recent study involving the AVA that examined the equine workforce found "irrespective of the level of experience or number of hours worked, the females in the study earned less than their male counterparts," says Dr Cristy Secombe, head of Veterinary and Public Affairs at the AVA.

The factors driving the gender pay gap in the profession are complex, but one of the most pervasive is unconscious bias centring on women's ability and expertise, or perceived lack thereof.

"In a profession which has been male dominated for many, many years, and now very much is not male dominated overall, a lot of the more senior people in the profession in terms of decision makers and practice owners are men," Professor Slater says. "There's this sense that there's a male view on suitability, capability and capacity, which then translates into immediate differences in pay."

He cites a 2020 UK study published in *Science Advances* that examined veterinary science as an example of a traditionally male-dominated industry now invested in hiring more women. Vets in senior roles were shown identical performance reviews of vets who had been randomly assigned a male or female name. "The profiles with the male name were consistently ranked as being more capable and appointed at a higher level than the female ones and also were, on average, awarded 10 per cent more salary than the female profiles," Professor Slater says.

And when asked if they thought bias existed against female veterinarians, most people who judged the male profile to be superior to the female one said they thought there was no bias in the workplace. "It's the very people who don't believe this bias who are biased," Professor Slater says.

There's also the issue of female vets having a stronger preference for part-time work, which conflicts with the traditional structure of a veterinary practice that demands round-the-clock commitment. But Noriel Williams, founder of new mobile veterinary service Cosy Paws Vet Care, says what's often viewed as choice to work fewer hours instead reflects cultural expectations about who should take care of children.

"We've got society putting a lot of pressure on women to stay at

home, because that is seen as women's work," she says. "And at the same time, employers often aren't willing to let their male employees step in and fill that gap should women want to work more hours."

### Towards greater equality

Is the gender pay gap likely to even out as older male vets retire and younger female vets gain more experience? Unlikely, says Williams. "If we don't do anything, we will see the few men that come into the industry rise into those management positions.

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The industry is also contending with what Dr Secombe calls a "profession pay gap". At the time of graduation, veterinarians are earning significantly less than people with other professional degrees," she says. "When you look at what happens three years post-graduation, almost all professional degrees are earning more than veterinarians."

Failing to address the gender pay gap by assuming it will even out over time may in fact worsen the profession pay gap. "We might find that although the pay gap may disappear, it might be that pay actually experiences a downward trend overall," Professor Slater says.

Effective strategies to help the industry combat the gender pay gap include many that have proved successful in a wide range of sectors. These include mentoring programs that promote practice ownership and the filling of senior positions by women, gender quotas for corporate leadership teams and restructuring practices around more flexible ways of working.

"While practices are still owned predominantly by men, it will be very difficult to change," Williams says.

Professor Slater says anti-bias training is another important tool for practices of all sizes. "It's about putting [anti-bias training] on the agenda for CPD programs and professional development and actually normalising it and recognising it.

"It's perfectly possible to make these changes, but it does require a change in mindset on the part of business owners." ▼