

# Vet Council Survey on Emergency and After Hours Care: Overview of key findings.

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## Introduction and methodology

An online survey was distributed by the Vet Council to veterinarians in June-July 2024. The survey comprised 41 questions seeking participants' perceptions of a range of issues related to the provision of emergency and after hours veterinary care.

## Respondents

Two hundred and thirty-nine people responded to the survey. Seventy-nine percent were veterinarians; 5% were non-veterinarians (vet nurse, vet technician, practice manager, client/customer, industry vet, in education, other) and 16% did not provide this information. Of those who were in clinical practice (n=155), 47% were in companion animal practice, 33% in mixed practice, 13% production animal, 6% equine and 1% shelter animal practice.

## After hours arrangements

The survey revealed significant variation in after-hours service arrangements in clinical practice. Among respondents who detailed their arrangements:

- **55%** covered their own after-hours work.
- **16%** shared responsibilities with one or more other practices.
- **19%** referred clients to dedicated after-hours centres.
- **5%** used a hybrid model, managing some cases personally while referring others.
- Only **2%** relied entirely on another clinic for after-hours coverage.

Triage arrangements also differed:

- **66%** did not employ non-veterinarian triage services.
- **23%** had nurses or non-veterinary staff handle calls.
- **8%** utilized dedicated triage services like Vet Chat (<https://www.vetchat.nz/>).
- **3%** adopted mixed approaches, such as shared triage duties or seasonal variations.

## Vet confidence, proficiency and willingness to do emergency care shifts.

Veterinary professionals highlighted the interconnectedness of confidence, competence, and willingness to manage emergency care after hours:

- **67%** observed that decision-making skills developed through emergency care were often or very often seen in their practices.
- **57%** acknowledged that confidence, proficiency, willingness to do after hours shifts, frequency of shifts, and wellbeing, influenced each other.

- **82%** noted the importance of non-technical skills in managing client relations and financial matters.

When asked who should take the lead on addressing this issue, the Veterinary Council of New Zealand (Vet Council) was most frequently identified, followed by the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) and individual clinics. This highlights the importance of advocacy, standards, and clinic-level support in this area.

## Client circumstances and expectations

There were mixed views as to whether unrealistic client expectations and concerns about liability created pressures for veterinarians.

- Unrealistic demands for after-hours care can exacerbate veterinarian fatigue and wellbeing concerns. This was seen as a major issue by **43%** of respondents.
- Veterinarians' concerns about liability could increase the likelihood of accepting non-emergency cases as emergencies but this was seen as a major issue by only **25%** of respondents.

Leadership for addressing these issues was most frequently suggested as lying with the Vet Council or NZVA, while individual clinics were also seen as playing a role. The data suggests a shared responsibility to address the issue, with many respondents advocating for an industry-wide approach.

## Financial considerations

Financial pressures in after-hours care were also examined:

- Vets sometimes felt compelled to discount fees for reasons including client financial constraints, reputation and concerns about patient suffering; **42%** reported this was a major issue.
- The growing prevalence of pet insurance was noted as a partial solution, enabling more appropriate fees.
- Trust and risk-sharing between practices could influence collaboration in after-hours services; this was seen as a major issue by **35%** of respondents.

Respondents identified the Vet Council, NZVA, and individual clinics as key players in addressing these challenges. The data suggest a collaborative approach, with many respondents indicating that insurance companies, professional bodies and other stakeholders should also participate to help manage client financial considerations in after-hours emergency care.

## Medical knowledge and training

- While tension can exist between the level of service that veterinarians believe is appropriate for emergency care and what clients expect, only **28%** reported this as a major issue.
- Clients who insist on seeing a vet rather than other qualified team members could exacerbate workload issues but only **20%** identified this as a major issue.

Individual clinics were the most frequently mentioned as the leaders for implementing training, with the Vet Council and NZVA providing guidance and support. The responses also indicate a need for collaboration with veterinary nursing and educational institutions for broader training efforts.

## Veterinarian professional development in practices

- Mentoring of less experienced vets was seen as vital by **74%** of respondents, and **69%** reported that non-technical skills not developed in vet training or mentoring were often required, especially financial management and interpersonal skills.
- The ability of a practice to mentor could be constrained by the number of experienced vets on staff, and mentors need to develop their skills and experience in mentoring. This was seen as a major issue by **41%** of respondents. .

Clinics were seen as primarily leading professional development, with the NZVA and the Vet Council closely following. Educational institutions, particularly Massey University, were also frequently mentioned, indicating their role in training for professional development.

## Workplace wellbeing and job satisfaction

- Veterinarians may choose to pursue an area of special interest in order to maintain their interest in their work. While this can potentially reduce generalist knowledge in the practice and increase the pressure for more vets to cover emergency care, only **10%** thought this was a major issue.
- Perceived remuneration differences between colleagues, other practices and industries can affect job satisfaction and wellbeing (only **23%** reported this as a major issue), but it can be difficult to compare staff or jobs due to differences in how emergency and after hours care is remunerated.

Clinics were seen as primarily responsible for wellbeing and job satisfaction, emphasizing the role of employers in creating supportive work environments. NZVA and the Vet Council also play roles, e.g. in providing guidelines, advocating for the profession, and supporting standards related to job satisfaction. The responses suggest that these three groups should collaborate to ensure that wellbeing is prioritized across the industry.

## Key Actions and Recommendations

Respondents proposed various actions to improve after-hours veterinary services, with the most frequent suggestions including:

1. **Client education:** Enhancing public understanding of emergency care costs, pet insurance, and realistic expectations.
2. **Fair remuneration:** Addressing financial pressures and ensuring sustainable compensation models.
3. **Review and clarification of after-hours requirements (including defining emergency care standards):** Clarifying emergency care requirements and fostering consistency across practices.
4. **Collaboration:** Encouraging resource-sharing and joint efforts between clinics.
5. **Workplace wellbeing:** Reducing burnout through rest periods and workload management.

## Conclusion

The survey findings underscore the complexity of after-hours veterinary care, involving interconnected issues of client expectations, financial pressures, training needs, and professional wellbeing. A collaborative approach involving the Vet Council, NZVA, individual clinics, and educational institutions is critical for addressing these challenges. Respondents emphasized the importance of education, fair compensation, and standardized policies to ensure sustainable and effective after-hours care for veterinary professionals, their clients and their patients.