

# Utilisation of equine veterinary nurses in New Zealand

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## Introduction

In 2022 an online survey, was conducted with the intention of gathering information on the utilisation and upskilling of qualified equine nurses in clinical practice. Equine veterinary nursing itself is a relatively profession in New Zealand, hence, most of the qualified nurses currently working in New Zealand originate from and completed their studies overseas.

Survey questions concentrated on how nurses are structured within the team, how many team members they have and how many nurses have formal qualifications. Specific qualifications included equine and small animal veterinary nurses, large animal veterinary technicians and international equivalent qualifications.

Further, the survey determined how many members of the team are unqualified or have been trained solely through clinical practice. Finally, nurses were asked about any benefits they receive as part of the employment package, if they were using their clinical skills and areas of continuing professional development (CPD) that they would like to see.

This survey was run under ethics approval, in conjunction with Otago Polytechnic.

## Study population

The survey was performed online and circulated to veterinary clinics and nurses across New Zealand via social media, emails and word of mouth. Responses from the survey predominately came from the central north island where we see a larger number of specialist equine clinics within New Zealand.

## Results and discussion

Overall, the total number of respondents was 18, consisting of currently practicing nurses across New Zealand. Over 78% of participants were qualified in veterinary nursing at certificate level or above, either in small animal or equine, of which 41% were overseas qualifications mainly originating from the United Kingdom. Larger equine specialist clinics employed the greatest proportion of nurses, technicians and support staff. These averaged greater than 10 members of equine support staff per clinic. Although this is positive, we found that there was only an average of 5-6 qualified members of staff per clinic and the results did not specify which qualification each member of staff held. This in turn shows that 29% of clinical team members had not undertaken any formal industry specific education. Consequently, this demonstrates that there is a significant gap in the industry, necessitating an increase in opportunities and a cultural shift towards formal nursing qualifications. It would be valuable to clinics and the industry, to encourage staff members to take up formal education and offer routes for career progression. Specialised equine nursing courses are becoming more prominent in Europe, such as the Diploma in Veterinary Nursing – Equine and the Equine extension programme for companion animal veterinary nurses. There are also options for career progression through the post graduate advanced equine veterinary nursing certificate. (Hartpury, 2024). By encouraging formal education within the team, it would ultimately lead to better job satisfaction and job retention of employees.

There are many education providers that offer routes of entry into veterinary nursing within New Zealand.

The main course available is the NZ Certificate in Animal Care (Level 3).

This course subsequently provides entry to the NZ Diploma in Veterinary Nursing (Level 6) and Bachelor of Veterinary Nursing (Level 7). The details of current education providers can be found through the Allied Veterinary Professional Regulatory Council (AVPRC) website. (AVPRC,2024). These courses require full or part time education but are also available via extramural study for employees wishing to incorporate formal

education into the workplace. There is also an option for unqualified nurses to obtain the qualification through Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) if they have worked in the industry for a minimum of 5 years (or full time equivalent).

There are currently works in place to produce an Equine Veterinary Nursing specific qualification, that is currently being assessed by industry members. With only a small number of potential intakes for the equine nursing strand, it unfortunately means the companion animal veterinary nursing takes priority.

Offering such a program could indeed provide a valuable opportunity for employees to further their education whilst still earning a wage. This could help retain skilled staff members within the industry and ultimately enhance the quality of care provided to clients and their patients. In addition to addressing the shortage of equine nursing professionals, the offering of vocational education opportunities in the industry could attract more individuals interested in pursuing careers in equine nursing.

When looking at how teams are structured, 64% of respondents specified having no distinguished roles between nurses, technicians and yard staff, often leading to confusion over how qualified and skilled staff members were. This is a common theme in the industry, and until there is a statutory protection of the 'Veterinary Nurse' title it will continue to provide confusion. This not only happens within the practice for employees but also to clients and the public. The Allied Veterinary Professional Regulatory Council (AVPRC) are currently working to gain protection for the 'Veterinary Nurse' title.

It is important to ensure that veterinary nursing remains an official qualification and a distinguished role within the profession.

In the UK there is still work in progress to gain protection of the title. Within the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) statutory register it is compulsory that all veterinary nurses (VN) must be on the register to practice within the UK. (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Veterinary Nurse Registration Rules 2017).

Enforcing regulations and standards through organisations like the AVPRC, which is currently a voluntary register, and the New Zealand Veterinary Nurses Association (NZVNA) is crucial. By setting clear guidelines and requirements for practicing nurses, these organizations can help uphold quality standards and ensure that veterinary professionals are correctly trained and qualified to provide the best possible care to our patients. Furthermore, aligning regulations and standards across different practicing bodies can help streamline processes and promote consistency in nursing practices. This also enhances the reputation and credibility of the veterinary profession. These entities currently address challenges, identify opportunities for improvement, and ultimately contribute to the advancement of the veterinary nursing profession in New Zealand.

Looking at the pay structure within nursing teams, 100% of respondents claimed they had no visible pay structure. It was positive to see that all respondents that claimed to work overtime on an on-call roster with or without weekend work were being rewarded with remuneration. Other paid benefits included 82% having paid memberships, 58% having paid social events and 35% having paid annual CPD. A proportionately low uptake of paid CPD being offered to nurses with only 35% uptake could be a further reflection on the small number of qualified nurses within the industry as prior formal training would have increased the nurses desire to learn more and participate in more CPD. Further, having a compulsory instead of voluntary number of CPD hours to maintain the qualification would also increase this uptake, and be overall beneficial in-patient care and nursing capabilities.

Finally, the survey discussed what clinical skills nurses are currently undertaking, what the limitations were, if any, and if they would like to see more recognition and accountability for equine nurses.

It was excellent to see that 82% of qualified nurses were already using their clinical skills. This included tasks ranging from; placing intravenous catheters, wound assessments and bandaging, performing physical exams, process and run laboratory samples, administering fluid therapy and administering medications. Even though it was reported that many nurses are currently performing these clinical duties there was a reasonably

large number of respondents that requested some CPD in all the above areas. This could be attributed to the inconsistency at which nurses are required to perform these tasks and how they are being utilised in practice.

The utilisation of equine veterinary nurses could be improved by recognition of the qualified VN within practice. By providing a formal equine nursing education pathway, it will give veterinarians the confidence to be able to delegate tasks to the nursing team that would then ease the workload of the veterinarian and provide much needed job satisfaction for the VN.

There is scope to delve deeper into more research and construct a survey to look at the companion animal veterinary nurses to gain a wider view of the industry patterns and hopefully provide support for the protection of the VN title.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, 94% of respondents were keen to see an increased proficiency in clinical skills and 88% wanting to see more recognition and accountability for EVN's, there is the drive and need for some positive change in the equine veterinary nursing industry.

Overall, empowerment and confidence in equine veterinary nurses (EVN's) is something we could focus on following the results of this survey. By providing a formal route of education alongside more CPD for our EVN's and creating a clear career pathway for students and current practice staff, we can build a larger community to help empower each other, share tips and information and overall increase the quality of our patient care.

## References

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