



Canadian Veterinary
Medical Association

Association canadienne
des médecins vétérinaires

**Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations to
the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance**

In Advance of the 2025 Federal Budget

August 2, 2024

Recommendation 1: That the federal government address workplace shortages and ensure there is a robust veterinary workforce through additional investments for projects and veterinary infrastructure. This can be achieved by recruiting and onboarding internationally trained veterinarians (ITVs), establishing a national testing centre for internationally educated veterinarians, and ensuring there are dedicated funds to support veterinary infrastructure.

Recommendation 2: That the federal government address workplace shortages by investing in the mental health of all veterinary professionals.

Recommendation 3: That the federal government invest in ways to maintain and strengthen the availability of critical veterinary drugs in the interest of protecting public health and safety, animal health and welfare, and food safety and security. Canada should take the lead in collaborating with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to improve shared drug approval pathways that are more efficient and economical.

Background

Since 1948, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) has been the national and international voice for Canada's veterinarians, providing leadership and advocacy for veterinary medicine. The CVMA speaks for over 15,000 licensed veterinarians across the country, who provide essential care to millions of animals, supporting public health, food safety, and animal welfare. The CVMA collaborates with its members nationwide to ensure optimal patient and client care while promoting best practices in environmental stewardship.

The CVMA is actively involved in numerous projects alongside colleagues and partners in the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Health Canada, and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. As Canada's national veterinary organization, the CVMA has the experience, national reach, and long-established reputation to credibly and efficiently engage with a wide array of stakeholder groups, including provincial governments, other health professions, international organizations, the public, and livestock producers, to name a few.

Veterinarians in private practice, industry, and government play integral roles in early detection, response, and recovery from foreign animal and zoonotic diseases. They also contribute to food safety and security, protect species diversity, contribute to climate change resilience and consequence management. By working closely with livestock producers and the aquaculture sector, veterinarians help promote and maintain biosecurity on thousands of land-based and water-based farms from coast to coast.

In addition, veterinarians provide diagnostic services in laboratories, support vaccine production and licensing, conduct research into emerging pathogens that affect both animal and human health, and serve as faculty at Canada's teaching institutions that are a fundamental pillar of sustaining and enhancing the capacity of Canada's healthcare system. Veterinary epidemiologists, in particular, played a vital role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across the country veterinarians are instrumental in safeguarding animal and public health. Veterinary oversight underpins the ability of Canada to trade in animals and animal products and thereby supports the well-being of the Canadian agricultural and aquaculture sectors, areas that are critical to the Canadian economy.

The CVMA's work is grounded in science and driven by evidence. As a leading advocate for animal health and welfare in Canada, the CVMA works closely with federal agencies and other stakeholder organizations to address matters of One Health, emphasizing the interconnectedness of animal, human, and environmental health.

A Robust Veterinary Workforce

Recommendation 1: That the federal government address workplace shortages and ensure there is a robust veterinary workforce through additional investments for projects and veterinary infrastructure. This can be achieved by recruiting and onboarding internationally trained veterinarians (FTVs), establishing a national testing centre for internationally educated veterinarians, and ensuring there are dedicated funds to support veterinary infrastructure.

The veterinary profession in Canada faces pressing challenges that demand immediate attention from the federal government. According to the ESDC's Canadian Occupation Projection System (COPS), the labour market is experiencing a structural deficit of both in the short term and through projections until 2031.¹ This shortage has significant implications for animal health and welfare, public health, the Canadian economy, in addition to the well-being of veterinary professionals.

The current workforce shortage poses a significant threat to the veterinary profession and its ability to provide quality care for clients. Practice owners and employers are struggling to recruit and retain veterinary professionals, raising concerns about maintaining the highest standards of care. The annual graduation rates from Canadian veterinary and technician/technologist colleges only marginally cover the attrition rates within the profession, while Canada's growing population increases the demand for veterinary services, necessitating a net annual growth in professionals to sustain quality services for clients.

Given that the veterinary workforce shortage is a global issue, it is crucial that Canada addresses it with urgency and comprehensiveness. Federal support through increased investments in projects and veterinary infrastructure is essential to building a robust veterinary workforce, ensuring high-quality animal care, and protecting public health.

We propose collaborating with the federal government to secure funding, including infrastructure investments, to address this shortage effectively. We also look forward to continuing our partnership with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to streamline the entry of internationally trained veterinarians into the Canadian workforce expeditiously.

To enhance the veterinary workforce, the CVMA recommends investing in initiatives such as establishing a *national testing centre for internationally educated veterinarians* at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVM). Currently, the licensure process for internationally educated veterinary applicants involves expensive and logistically challenging practical examinations. A national testing centre would more effectively facilitate the licensure process,

¹ Employment and Social Development (ESDC). "Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS)." COPS Home - Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS) - Canada.ca, November 16, 2021. <https://occupations.esdc.gc.ca/sppc-cops/w.2lc.4m.2@-eng.jsp>

increase the opportunities for internationally educated veterinarians, and help expand the capacity of veterinary service available to the public.

Although expansion plans at three of Canada's five veterinary schools aim to alleviate some of the pressure, they will only partially address the gap in the workforce. Currently, the WCVN is operating at full capacity, with only 100 testing spots available for 250 candidates. This bottleneck significantly delays the entry of qualified veterinarians into the workforce.

A proposed \$50 million capital investment to establish a national testing center at the WCVN, as part of a broader \$100 million development project, could dramatically improve this situation. This investment would increase the annual number of veterinarians entering the workforce from 55 to approximately 165. Such a substantial increase would help address the immediate shortage and support the long-term sustainability of Canada's veterinary workforce.

Broadly supported across the veterinary and agricultural sectors, this one-time investment will ensure a sustainable veterinary workforce for Canada. It is crucial for managing emerging biothreats, ensuring animal welfare and maintaining food safety. Furthermore, it is essential for safeguarding Canada's \$37.3 billion animal production sector, which plays a significant role in the national economy.

Streamlined pathways for licensure of internationally trained veterinarians, dedicated veterinary infrastructure funding, and a national testing centre to address severe shortages, would prove instrumental in supporting the expansion and innovation of clinical teaching, training, and research for the next generation of veterinarians.

Mental Health of Veterinary Professionals

Recommendation 2: That the federal government address workplace shortages by investing in the mental health of all veterinary professionals.

A concerning proportion of veterinarians experience burnout and mental health challenges, with one in five reporting suicidal thoughts during their careers.² These alarming statistics highlight the urgent need to prioritize the well-being of veterinary professionals and their animal health teams by addressing the emotional toll of the profession on its practitioners.

The CVMA has already dedicated substantial resources to raising mental health awareness and providing support for its members and students. Despite these efforts, a significant number of veterinary professionals still hesitate to discuss their mental health issues or seek help. This reluctance exacerbates the problem and highlights the urgency for collective action to remove the stigma associated with mental health in the veterinary profession.

To prioritize the mental well-being of veterinary professionals, we recommend the following actions.

- I) **Increase Mental Health Awareness and Support:** The federal government should advocate for and invest in enhanced mental health services specifically for veterinarians. Providing direct and accountable funding for these services can help remove the stigma associated with discussing personal mental health issues and encourage more professionals to seek help.

- II) **Address Workforce Shortages:** Tackling the shortage of veterinary professionals would significantly improve their well-being. The current shortage places immense pressure on veterinary teams, leading to extended work hours without adequate rest. This increased workload, combined with existing stressors, has a profound impact on the mental health and overall well-being of the veterinary staff.

By prioritizing these actions, we can help alleviate the emotional strain on veterinary professionals and improve their capacity to deliver high-quality care.

² Croteau, Jill. "Veterinarians More than Twice as Likely to Have Suicidal Thoughts than Other Canadians: Study." Global News, May 12, 2021. <https://globalnews.ca/news/7856867/veterinarians-suicide-thoughts-rate-canada/>

Maintaining and Strengthening Availability of Critical Veterinary Drugs in the Interest of Protecting Public Health and Safety, Animal Health and Welfare, and Food Safety and Security

Recommendation 3: That the federal government invest in ways to maintain and strengthen the availability of critical veterinary drugs in the interest of protecting public health and safety, animal health and welfare, and food safety and security. Canada should take the lead in collaborating with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to improve shared drug approval pathways that are more efficient and economical.

Veterinarians in Canada face significant challenges accessing essential pharmaceutical agents, including antimicrobials, anti-parasitics, analgesics, sedatives, and other critical medications necessary for animal health and welfare, public health, and food safety. Many critical drugs are currently unavailable to veterinarians to treat their patients due to supply chain challenges and manufacturers' reluctance to invest in the costly registration process overseen by Health Canada. For instance, there is a shortage of registered antimicrobial drugs needed to treat infections in livestock such as dairy cattle, swine, and poultry.

Additionally, older drugs are being removed from the Canadian market due to recent changes in Health Canada's Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) regulations, often without being replaced by new alternatives. This instability, in addition to increased risks to the health and welfare of animals, puts Canadian livestock producers at a competitive disadvantage compared to those in countries where these drugs remain available.

The lack of effective drugs can lead to significant risks for food safety and security in Canada, potentially promoting antimicrobial resistance due to the use of less effective, but available, drugs. This issue affects not only domestic safety but also deeply impacts Canada's international trade relations.

An urgent example of this challenge is the availability of xylazine, a sedative used in veterinary medicine, which is now being misused as an adulterant in the illegal drug supply, particularly in combination with fentanyl. This misuse poses a serious public health concern. As the federal government addresses this emerging threat and explores potential risk mitigation measures, it must ensure that xylazine remains available for legitimate veterinary use, where it is essential for the safe and humane handling of animals.

To address these issues, the CVMA advocates for the following:

- 1) **Improving Drug Approval Pathways:** Collaborate with the FDA and EMA to streamline and enhance drug approval processes, making them more efficient and affordable.

- II) **Ensuring Drug Availability:** Support initiatives to maintain a stable supply of essential veterinary drugs and address the challenges caused by regulatory changes and market withdrawals.

- III) **Balancing Public Health and Veterinary Needs:** Develop strategies to manage the misuse of drugs like xylazine in the illegal drug market while ensuring continued access for legitimate veterinary use.

The CVMA remains committed to working with the federal authorities to advocate for a more effective veterinary drug regulatory system, ensuring the health and well-being of Canadians and their animals. By carefully balancing regulation and drug availability, the federal government can safeguard public health while supporting the critical needs of the veterinary profession in Canada.