

**Mr TARLAMIS** (South Eastern Metropolitan) (18:06): I move:

That debate on this motion be adjourned to later this day.

**Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until later this day.**

### VETERINARY WORKFORCE

**Mr MEDDICK** (Western Victoria) (18:06): I move the motion I gave notice of earlier this day, which reads:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
  - (a) there is a vet shortage across Victoria, creating an animal welfare crisis;
  - (b) the closure of vet clinics and after-hours care is adversely impacting regional areas;
  - (c) injured wildlife is being left to suffer as care is voluntarily provided by vet clinics and must be managed between paying clients;
  - (d) rising veterinary care fees are also creating an accessibility barrier, particularly for animal rescue groups, pensioners and healthcare card holders;
  - (e) the Andrews government has taken the positive step of adding the certificate IV in veterinary nursing to the free TAFE course list from the beginning of 2022;
- (2) calls on the government to:
  - (a) establish a stronger framework for the wellbeing of companion animals and wildlife;
  - (b) open publicly funded vet clinics across Victoria;
  - (c) create incentives for vets to join the industry through study opportunities and from overseas;
  - (d) upskill veterinary nurses into nurse practitioners who can undertake minor surgeries and surgery preparation to relieve the burden on vets; and
  - (e) establish specialty wildlife hospitals to close the knowledge gap on native animal care and to ensure wildlife receive treatment in a timely manner.

Despite growing up in a household where there was very little money, it was often the case that my siblings and I would take in animals in need of care. Indeed these are some of my earliest memories of a lifelong dedication to the protection of animals. The animals in our home were loved, but there was never any money for vet care. It was always a case of hoping that they would not become ill, because that would mean forking out money we simply did not have. Regular check-ups were just completely out of the question. How different things would have been if we had had access to a publicly funded system. That was the experience back then, and shockingly that is the situation today. Pensioners and those on healthcare cards will know this experience intimately, where they feel the pain of guilt as they are made to feel neglectful through economic circumstance.

It might be difficult to comprehend a vet shortage in Australia. So many of us grew up wanting to work with and care for animals. If you did not know better, it would be easy to imagine an inexhaustible willingness to train for and perform this job. Our companion animals bring so much happiness. Working with them every day is a dream held by many. Vets provide a frontline service, and their unwavering compassion under immense pressure is admirable. But there is a dark side plaguing the vet industry across Victoria—indeed across the country. Vets are burnt out and undersupported. Despite years dedicated to the intensive study of their profession, vets are walking away. The Australian Veterinary Association workforce survey in 2021 found that 31 per cent of practices advertising for vets were taking 12 months or longer to fill positions. Thirty-eight per cent of vets perform on-call duties, and despite the efforts of individual clinics to facilitate upskilling and support their dedicated on-call staff, these hours are unsociable. They lead to isolation and unfair to totally impossible expectations.

I need this to be clear: in Australia today over 45 per cent of veterinarians suffer from depression. Vets are almost four times more likely to die by suicide than the general population. These shocking figures

equate to a veterinarian taking their own life on average every 12 weeks. Around the world crisis hotlines have been set up to deal with the specific issues facing vets. Lack of workplace support, financial obligation and high euthanasia rates beyond their control are contributing factors. Vets are often accused of only doing their job for the money, despite earning low incomes compared to other medical roles.

In one article Australian vet Anita Link said that she often has days in the clinic that are spent acting as shock absorbers for the emotions of their clients. Perfectionism among vets is rife. And how could it not be when you have the lives of loved ones in your hands? She goes on:

We marinate in guilt over taking sick days. If we take a day off, our work doesn't wait until we're back. It needs to be re-scheduled, cancelled, or (worst of all) it is dumped on our already hard-working colleagues. We are almost impossible to replace at short notice. So, we don't take a sick day unless we are totally incapacitated or extremely contagious.

The industry has dealt with staffing shortages for years, but the pandemic made them worse. As animal adoptions increased during lockdowns, so too did demand for vets. Today, when working from home is just part of life, we are spending more time with our furry companions. There is no doubt they love having us around, and it means health issues are being recognised more quickly.

Vets worked tirelessly and selflessly through the peak of COVID to meet demand, but it meant quicker and less personal encounters. The Victorian vets I know are heavily emotionally invested in the outcomes of their patients, but many environments do not allow for the standards vets set for themselves. On top of this, vets have a good Samaritan expectation to treat our native wildlife for free. It is a critical feature of the veterinary service. But when vets are already overworked and having to juggle paying clients between wildlife, it weighs down on an already fragile system. Despite the best possible intentions, native animals across the state are suffering unnecessarily long lengths of time before being treated. During spring and summer Wildlife Victoria's emergency response service receives up to 300 calls a day. Most of these animals will need to see a vet, and right now appropriate care cannot be guaranteed.

Over the years my office has received increased correspondence about the crisis plaguing the veterinary industry. It is coming from vets themselves, vet nurses and members of the public. There have been multiple emergency after-hours clinics closing in my electorate in the last year alone. Those in this place who have gone through the stress of needing an emergency vet appointment know that every minute matters. But there are regional Victorians who are driving hours, as far as the CBD, to have their pets treated, and sometimes it is too late.

Rescue groups cannot secure desexing appointments, meaning animals are waiting longer to be placed in forever homes. Animals are staying longer in rescue, which means shelters are staying full. The shortage crisis is impacting the whole system from start to finish. And even in the circumstance where an appointment can be secured there are many Victorians who can no longer afford the growing cost of vet care. Nobody should be forced to give up their best friend because they cannot afford their veterinary care, especially when it is often through no fault of their own.

That brings me to our solution. It is called Veticare. We have a public health system for humans. It is something that we are all immensely proud of. We all know that, if we need it, that green card in our wallet will give us compassionate health care. It is time we offered the same to companion animals and wildlife.

Creating a public veterinary health system will not just improve vet affordability and accessibility but will help to attract more vets to the industry by alleviating workload, improving working conditions and offering a more sustainable workplace.

Our proposal includes opening public clinics for companion animal care but also for wildlife. Having vets dedicated to the specialised care of wildlife will not only relieve the struggle vets currently face treating injured native animals for free but provide better care for them, sooner. There are so many

hardworking wildlife rescuers, carers and shelters across this state who in the current system are spending their own money to rehabilitate animals injured by road strike and other forms of human interference. It is a broken model, and their work must be recognised too. The least we can do is provide them with free or low-cost specialised care in return for their service to the community. By relieving pressures on the vet system we can ensure retention of both vets and nurses and play a part in reducing compassion fatigue, a phenomenon plaguing the industry and impacting the mental health of vets. But we must also do more to attract new vets to the industry, such as increasing wages of vets to reflect their skills and qualifications, offering subsidies on study opportunities and bringing in vets from overseas to Australia by having a world-class system.

In 2021 we worked with the Andrews Labor government to secure vet nursing on free TAFE. Vet nurses are the unsung heroes of animal care. They are passionate and hardworking, but too often they operate with minimal autonomy. To alleviate the pressure on doctors, the human healthcare system introduced nurse practitioners. Nurse practitioners do additional training enabling them to diagnose and treat illnesses, prescribe medication and do other tasks similar to a doctor that a regular registered nurse cannot. This can and should be implemented for vet nurses too. By upskilling vet nurses, animals with minor health issues or needing standard treatment, such as teeth cleans, can be seen sooner, allowing vets to reduce their workload and have sufficient time to deal with complex cases and emergencies. This change will also benefit the wildlife space, with more staff ready and on hand to assess, triage and administer treatment to wildlife when they are brought into clinics by members of the public. Not only will this play a role in reducing stress and burnout, but it will also increase job satisfaction among vet nurses, another section of the industry with a retention problem. Importantly, a world-class veterinary care system will complement and recognise the skills and experience in Victoria's wildlife and animal rescue sector and help to further professionalise and support their work, allowing them to take in more animals and save more lives.

Everybody deserves to experience the joy and companionship of an animal, no matter where they live or how much they earn. We are a state that is known for our love of companion animals, and we are known as a state that is being progressive in this space and in many others. We have the opportunity to set the benchmark for the best model of animal protection in the country and be the first to implement a public healthcare system for animals, the first in Australia and I believe the first in the world. I call on the government and colleagues across the chamber to support this important motion today.

**Ms TERPSTRA** (Eastern Metropolitan) (18:19): I rise to speak on this motion that Mr Meddick has moved, and I would like to thank Mr Meddick for his very thoughtful contribution in this space, his ongoing advocacy and commitment to pursuing justice for animals and his continued advocacy for all manner of animals, whether they are furry, feathered, scaled, domesticated, farm animals or wildlife. It is a very important contribution, and I thank him for his ongoing efforts in this area.

The motion highlights a number of things that I think are well known and not disputed on the government benches. We know there is a shortage of vets across Victoria. We know that vets are suffering through mental health conditions. We know that the suicide rate among veterinarians as a profession is something that is just not acceptable. It is a profession where vets are dealing with animals that are very loved by their owners, of course, and it can be stressful for owners, it can be stressful for pets and it takes an emotional toll on people. I thank all the veterinarians who work in Victoria under very difficult circumstances, whatever those circumstances are, for their dedication to their profession and for their ongoing work in caring for our furry, feathered or scaled kids, whatever they are.

On a positive note I note that the government has—and this was exciting; I remember speaking on it in this chamber, and I know the minister who sits in front of me, Minister Tierney, spoke on this as well and has spoken on this a number of times—taken the step of adding the certificate IV in vet nursing to the free TAFE course list from the beginning of 2022, and I know that even in my own region the vet nursing course on the free TAFE list has been incredibly popular. It has been amazing to see the uptake, especially amongst women. It has been incredible, and that is a positive step that we

have taken in that as well. So there are some positives that are coming—but of course also workforce shortages. I know Mr Meddick talked about that as well. There are lots of shortages everywhere at the moment. It has been, I guess, something that the pandemic shone a light on—that once we did not have the steady supply of international labour it had a knock-on effect in a range of ways in a range of areas.

I note that there are a range of things that the motion sets out. It then calls on the government to take a range of actions as well, and animal welfare is absolutely a priority of the Andrews Labor government. Our community expects we will do the right thing by animals in our homes, out in our community, on our farms and within various industries. In 2018 the government committed to modernising Victoria's animal welfare legislation to replace the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 as it no longer reflects the needs of animals, industry, our community or government. We have been developing a new act, and this takes time. It takes time to get the laws right. Modernising Victoria's animal protection legislation will also help the welfare of our animals. A directions paper was released in October 2020, and it highlights key reform areas, which include recognising the sentience of animals, introduction of minimum standards for care of animals and formalising a role for scientific knowledge and expert opinion to inform decisions under the act. The draft legislation is currently being informed by feedback, and we have undertaken extensive stakeholder and community consultation and engagement. Further detail on that will be released in the coming months. We are committed to making sure that the legislative reforms are right, and we will fund the ongoing modernisation of Victoria's animal care and protection laws with significant investments in the 2022–23 budget.

I might just say, talking about animal sentience for a moment, I was having a conversation with Mr Meddick earlier today about my dog, Skye. I just tweeted something the other day about this. I know absolutely that animals feel pain. They know when you are suffering. They seem to have a sense of what they need to do to be close to you. I was commenting that while I was sick with COVID and even when I had my fourth jab the other day and was a bit unwell, my dog, Skye, lay right next to me on the bed, put her head across my chest and stuck with me the whole day. She did the same thing when I was sick with COVID. Of course my poor girl Skye has got an upset tummy at the moment. She cannot tell me what it is going on, but when she does not go to eat her dinner then I know something is definitely up. I am fortunate to be in a position to say that I can afford to take my dog to the vet, because I can see when she is unwell, she is suffering. If anyone in the chamber knows what staffies are like or for those who might be playing along at home and own a staffy, you know that staffies are the clowns of the dog world. They are funny, they are loving and they are gorgeous, but they are also very emotional and they are very perceptive. They have emotional reactions. I know that if we mention a particular word, Skye gets embarrassed, but she also reacts to other words that make her run or chase things.

This is what we come to know and love about our animals as pets. I know that when she is not feeling well I am concerned for her. As I just said, I am fortunate to be in the position of being able to get her the vet care that she may need right now. Finding the time is another thing, but I know that it is a priority for me and my family to make sure she gets the vet care that she needs. But that is not the case for everybody.

The 2022–23 budget included a total of \$18.6 million in funding for animal care and protection over the next three years. We have invested in the Ballarat animal hospital. The previous Minister for Agriculture, Mary-Anne Thomas, announced \$11.5 million to build the new hospital. The City of Ballarat mayor said that \$11.5 million will help deliver the biggest improvement in animal welfare in the Ballarat region in more than 100 years. We are also delivering on the first pet census. I will have to find out more detail about that. I want to know how I can take part in the pet census, because we have got a cat, a dog, a chicken and a lizard. I think we need to inform the government about our pets, because we are not the standard dog and cat family. We have got other things there, and I reckon we will find that there will be a fair swag of Victorians that will also have similar scaly pets, not just your usual feathered or furred kinds. The pet census will collect data across a range of areas relevant to pet

ownership and include the demographics of Victoria's pet owners, general matters relevant to pet health, diet and exercise, the costs and services associated with purchasing and caring for pets, the social and wellbeing impacts of pet ownership and more.

Can I say, my daughter has a lizard called Tilly the reptile, and we go to great lengths to make sure that Tilly in its enclosure has a range of enrichment items, that it can burrow and it has rocks that it can bask on and warm its tummy on to help digest its food. We make sure that in the enclosure the temperature is right and that there is the right amount of humidity so when it sheds its skin it can do so in a fashion that does not impinge on its functioning in other ways. So, as you can tell, there is a great deal of thought that gets put into it. Some people might think, 'Well, it's only a lizard', but we want to make sure that the lizard is living its best life in the best way that it can. So I look forward to seeing and participating in the pet census. There is a lot we can tell government about how we put a lot of time, effort and energy into caring for our animals at home.

I could go on; there are lots of things that we are doing. We are looking at Victoria's cat management strategy. We have got the task force on rehoming pets, which I know Mr Meddick participated in. He did a power of work and assisted us greatly on that. We have got the Victorian pet exchange register—I know there will be other speakers that will no doubt speak in more detail on some of this—and of course our animal welfare grants program as well. The 2021 state budget committed \$7.5 million to animal welfare grants. That was \$5 million to support rehoming of dogs and cats, \$1.5 million to support pet desexing and \$1 million to support equine rescue and rehab, and there is loads and loads more.

I think I will leave my contribution there other than just to quickly say that over 115 000 Victorians have enrolled in free TAFE since it was introduced, and a fair swag of those people of course participated in the uptake of the certificate IV in vet nursing, which was added to the free TAFE list, as I said earlier, so that is over \$281 million saved in course fees for Victorians for TAFE. I will conclude my contribution there. There is lots more that I could say. I will leave more notes for others to say. We are undertaking significant work in this space. As I said earlier, and in conclusion, the protection of animals and wildlife in Victoria is a priority of the Andrews Labor government.

**Ms BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (18:29): I am pleased to rise today to speak on Mr Meddick's motion and indeed vets and the issue around companion animals, wildlife and also large animals that we use both for recreation and as our food source—and very valuable it is. I must admit to the house that as we only saw this motion today at lunchtime I feel that I would have much preferred to be able to have some deep discussions with both my local vets and also the Australian Veterinary Association.

I have actually just put in a very brief call to Dr Hugh Millar, and I thank him for interrupting his afternoon to have that discussion about some of his thoughts. I certainly will not tie him down to his position, because he is flying blind generally on this Veticare motion, but I will make some comments based on our discussion in a moment.

Certainly we know that owning a companion animal is a wonderful thing and for most families brings about a sense of mental health, a sense of looking after something that is not yourself, a caring environment that can reduce levels of depression. That companionship is very important, and on many occasions for various reasons we do not have human companionship. If people live alone, then a pet can be an absolute godsend and an enhancement to people's lives. If you do have a family setting or a couple where the family has moved out and left the family pet, it certainly also can provide a very warm and joyful experience to own companion animals. What we do know is that through the COVID period in the last two years pet ownership across the nation has gone up by about 8 per cent, or nearly 10 per cent. We also know that it is now nudging 70 per cent of the population that has a pet of some form. I am not going to drill down species by species, but we also know that unfortunately—and I am hearing this from a dear friend of mine who is a vet nurse—post COVID we are seeing more pets being relinquished or people going back to work and not feeling that they are able to look after that

pet, and in not wanting to neglect a pet, putting it up for adoption. I will speak to that a little bit later in my contribution.

We do know that certainly—and I agree with Mr Meddick on this one—our vets are under the pump. Certainly there are workforce shortages, and that has been very clear again speaking with my local vets throughout the pandemic. There has been this surge of pet ownership. Also people have been home and looking at their pets and finding things wrong with them and then taking them off to the vet. I know that to get in has been a very big challenge, and also having staff that are furloughed through illness potentially is really putting pressure on our veterinary practices, both small animal and indeed large vet practices. I know when you talk about large vet practices, certainly in regional Victoria—and I live in South Gippsland—they really are under the pump. They are 24/7. If you have got an animal down for whatever reason, if you are calving or the like, that vet comes out 24/7, and that is also putting pressure on them with this post-pandemic environment.

I would like just to talk on a few issues that can impact on workforce shortages. First of all, there is a very high bar set—and there should be—for becoming a vet, becoming a doctor of veterinary science. It takes up to six years to be a registered veterinary practitioner and then many years of experience to really put yourself into that very high calibre. I know that our local vets do as well have a very great training procedure about nurturing new vets that come into the practice. Indeed in our particular one I know that they are often having people from overseas, from South Africa and from India from time to time. Attracting people to come from overseas of course stopped during the pandemic as well—it was a no go. So there is an attrition rate with those students, and also reduced or low entry numbers into university. That pathway of committing for six years is a challenge, and all of the fees that go along with that. There was reduced capacity during COVID and greater demand for services, and indeed speaking to my dear friend, she talked about fatigue—both fatigue of the vets and of the vet nurses and staff. Also unfortunately she spoke about customer unrest, we will say, or even customer abuse, and having those unreal expectations about that pet that you have brought in.

A Melbourne vet clinic has cited suicide as one of the most significant reasons why vets leave the industry. It is indeed somewhere between two and four times higher than in general practice. I think Mr Meddick might have made reference to that. I congratulate the Australian Veterinary Association on providing support for veterinary practitioners from their angle. It really does need to be a whole-of-practice support network.

In terms of the closure of vet clinics and after-hours care in regional Victoria, I take up Mr Meddick's point: as I have just said, particularly large animal vets have to be called out at all times and with all levels of pressure. Indeed, speaking with Dr Millar about the extra lengths that vets go to in terms of wildlife support, if somebody brings in an injured animal, whether it be from a road injury or the like or if they find an injured animal, I know that vets go above and beyond on many, many occasions. But of course it still costs them, so there is that cost impost into the bargain. When I first moved into the place where I am living—my home—very soon afterwards a kangaroo came right up to our front door and curled itself up on our doorstep to die. My street had a fantastic vet in it, so we brought her down and she euthanised it on my front doorstep. It was very sad for the animal, but we think the joey survived.

Going on, one of the other comments that has been relayed to me by a constituent is in relation to animal rescue—the cost of desexing, microchipping and vaccination. They also put constraints on people, and there are the added pressures that can play out.

One other comment, with the limited time that I have, in relation to wildlife and hospitals: one of the biggest killers of wildlife, undisputedly, is bushfire. We saw that in the 2019–20 bushfires, when 1.5 million hectares of our bush was incinerated. It is probably almost unquantifiable, but they were absolutely in the thousands upon thousands. One way we can stop the decimation of our wildlife is to do all the proper practices—Indigenous firestick cool burns and preparatory burns. Really active management of our bush will have a positive influence on the life and wellbeing of our wildlife.

Finally, in terms of the potential for foot-and-mouth disease, the former Nationals member for Benalla is Dr Bill Sykes. When the outbreak occurred in the UK many years ago, he went over there and participated in the euthanising process, and quite devastating it was. What he is doing right now is connecting with old veterinary colleagues, or retired vets, to bring them out and have that conversation: if there is—and, please, we hope that there will not be—an outbreak in Australia, how those vets will be able to support the community and their farmers, because it will be gut wrenching for farmers to have to put down animals due to foot-and-mouth. We hope that does not need to happen. I again call on the government to do everything it can.

In relation to Veticare, I spoke briefly with Dr Millar. I think we had a discussion around the need to have consultation about this. The devil is always in the detail. Something may sound good on a piece of paper, but there needs to be a whole lot of workshopping around who pays for it and how and what it looks like.

**Mr BARTON** (Eastern Metropolitan) (18:39): I rise to speak on Mr Meddick's motion. Mr Meddick's motion contains two main propositions. The first deals with addressing the issue of affordable vet care, and the second promotes the training and education of veterinary nurses to give them both the training and the experience to perform minor surgeries and procedures. I will address affordable care now.

Despite their willingness, vets are often unable to provide a high level of care to all animals who pass through their doors due to a range of reasons such as staff shortages, resourcing and the financial constraints of their owners. The crisis has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with more Victorians taking on a pet than ever before coupled with vets choosing to leave the industry and seek out other opportunities. This has mostly impacted regional and rural areas, with a number of regional centres no longer having access to the veterinary care they need and the closest emergency vet clinic being located in metropolitan Melbourne.

The mental and physical health benefits of having a pet are widely recognised, yet often the ability to have one is restricted to only those who can afford it. We believe all Victorians should have the opportunity for and the privilege of the companionship of animals. Many vet clinics are corporate owned, and the expectations from their shareholders mean that vets are often forced to prioritise their paying customers to stay open, which can be at odds with animal welfare. Pro bono work is often at the expense of individual veterinarians. So Mr Meddick's plan is to establish government-funded veterinary hospitals similar to the human health care system, which would implement a bulk-billing model for veterinary care across Victoria with priority for concession card holders, pensioners and animal rescuers and carers for both pets and wildlife. To a limited degree we have fun places that have been proven to work—for example, the Healesville Sanctuary, the Lort Smith Animal Hospital and Zoos Victoria. Established dedicated wildlife hospitals in regional areas with wildlife-skilled vets to reduce the burden on other clinics would be a welcome step.

Mr Meddick's second proposition looks to increase the opportunities for veterinary nurses. Because of long-term employee retention challenges for both vets and nurses due to compassion fatigue, the government has added vet nursing to free TAFE, which will help attract some to the sector. But more needs to be done to address retention issues and barriers to prioritising both paying customers and community expectations. Vets are expected to accept injured wildlife from the public for free. However, staff and resources shortages and priority of paying clients often result in them being unable to treat wildlife immediately, resulting in prolonged suffering and rising vet fees to meet shareholder expectations in privately owned veterinary clinics. On top of this, vet wages do not equate to their training when compared to medical doctors.

There is difficulty in attracting new vets to the industry. There are fewer university enrolments as well as regulatory and legislative hurdles for vets from overseas being able to practise in Australia. There is a need to supply extra training and upskilling for vet nurses to become technicians and nurse practitioners. In human medicine nurse practitioners and technicians are allowed to do minor surgical

procedures. Applying the same principles in the animal healthcare sector would reduce the patient load burden on vets and surgeons, reduce costs in the industry, enable more animals to be cared for and increase patient access to needed medical and health care. There would be improved retention of current vet nurses due to more professional responsibility, improved pay and greater workplace satisfaction. This system already exists in the United States and works well both for professionals and animal welfare.

There is a need for improved pay and conditions across the veterinary sector to address the retention challenges and the implementation of better mental health support across the veterinary sector to address compassion fatigue and the high rates of suicide. This industry is one of the most suicide prone professions. This is a terrible thing.

In closing, there are a range of challenges facing the veterinary industry across Victoria. This is ultimately impacting animal welfare, vet retention and adequate care for native animals. We need to consider solutions that will lead to a more streamlined system, improved affordability and increased job satisfaction for those who work in the industry. Victoria has an opportunity to lead the way on pet welfare. That is why I will support this motion from Mr Meddick.

**Ms WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (18:45): I rise to speak on this motion from Mr Meddick, and I do so proudly as a member of the Andrews Labor government, who have time and time again demonstrated our commitment to upholding the rights and welfare of animals in our state. Our government's record pertaining to animal welfare is extensive. Most significantly we banned puppy farms in 2017. Perhaps I should not say it with such enthusiasm—puppy farms—given what happens there. We delivered nation-leading reforms which ended the cruel practice of lining up hundreds of dogs in a row with the sole purpose of pumping out puppies to sell them off. In addition we are supporting the RSPCA in fighting illegal breeders, funding \$5 million for their dedicated special investigations unit. It seems like that is a pretty significant thing—worthy maybe of a television show at some point in the future, I must say—to stamp out this practice for good. Our significant rental reforms have legislated that every tenant now has the right to own a pet, because everyone deserves to be able to own a pet. This to me is so significant and very close to my heart.

So we have delivered Victoria's first *Animal Welfare Action Plan*, which was developed by the former minister, Minister Pulford, and we established Animal Welfare Victoria, bringing together all aspects of domestic animal and animal welfare research, policy, education and indeed compliance into one dedicated agency. We have reformed the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee to ensure the government receives expert advice to support our busy animal welfare agenda. It is a very busy animal agenda indeed, because the Andrews Labor government is investing unprecedented amounts in ensuring that animal welfare in this state is protected and preserved.

I will just take a moment here in my remarks to give a personal shout-out to the Lort Smith Animal Hospital and all their incredible, remarkable, fantastic and fabulous volunteers. The Lort Smith hospital in North Melbourne holds a very special place in my heart. I have spoken about it before. Indeed this is where my beloved Bootsy came from. Lort Smith is an absolutely iconic Melbourne institution and has been providing comprehensive treatment for animals since 1936. I was delighted that through Animal Welfare Victoria this government was able to provide a \$50 000 grant to Lort Smith for a new animal adoption centre in Campbellfield in the Northern Metropolitan Region. This purpose-built, brand new animal adoption centre will take over from the services and facilities currently provided by the North Melbourne adoption hub. It will be a safe haven for surrendered animals who are already ready for adoption, where they can play freely and let their true personalities shine. Indeed I was very happy to recently visit Lort Smith with my colleague Mr Meddick, alongside Minister Thomas, for the announcement of the Andrews Labor government's acceptance of all 17 recommendations of the task force on rehoming pets. I also got to meet some particularly adorable, cute kittens while I was there. The task force made 17 recommendations to improve the rehoming of dogs and cats in our state, including those used in medical research. All recommendations are supported by the Victorian government.



Unlike shelters and pounds, the rehoming sector is not currently required to meet specific standards of care or operation. The task force recommended regulating the rehoming sector to establish consistent standards of care and operation and improve transparency in the movement of animals between shelters, pounds and rescue groups. As part of the implementation activities, the Labor government will improve collaboration and information sharing between the shelters, council pounds and rehoming groups.

I was tempted on more than one occasion at that session, and I think Mr Meddick could see it in my eyes, to take off with one of those little kittens. One was called Peaches or Pumpkin, I think. But some would know from my contributions in this place that I already have my hands full with Pickles. I have spoken about Pickles before, and I will just say that Pickles is a very, very special part of my life. I did appreciate some time over the winter break to see him grow big and strong and to make sure also that he got all of his required checks with our local vet. So can I just do a shout-out to the folks that look after Pickles up in Thornbury: thanks for doing what you do to keep our beloved Pickles strong.

Look, I could go on about the tunnel and all sorts of things about Pickles, but I will not because I would not stop. So I will instead talk about the recent 2022–23 state budget and what that delivered for animal care and protection over the next three years, including a very significant budget commitment of \$18.6 million. In early May 2022 the previous Minister for Agriculture, Mary-Anne Thomas, announced the \$11.5 million investment to build the new Ballarat animal hospital. The City of Ballarat mayor, Cr Daniel Moloney, said the money will help deliver the biggest improvement in animal welfare in the Ballarat region in more than 100 years. Given I have got some loved ones up there who also have loved ones in their family that will seek the support of an animal hospital I assume at some point over the next little while, this indeed was very much welcomed by our family. This is what government really is all about. We are always supporting our regions and are committed to protecting the welfare of animals.

We have also committed to invest in Victoria's first-ever pet census. This investment will strengthen the government's understanding of the companion animal sector, including its volume and social and economic impacts, to develop and prioritise reforms and programs that will support and enhance Victoria's high animal welfare standards.

Unlike my colleague Ms Terpstra, who will make quite a significant, I think, contribution to the pet census, mine will say not much—in fact nothing at all as I am not a current owner of a pet—but I will say that members of my family will be very delighted to participate in whatever form that comes out. So I too am eagerly awaiting the arrival of the pet census, which will collect data across a range of areas relevant to pet ownership and pet welfare, including the demographics of Victoria's pet owners; general matters relating to pet health, diet and exercise; the costs and services associated with purchasing and caring for pets; and the social and wellbeing impacts of pet ownership. This data will provide the government with a clearer understanding of the pet population and pet owners.

I wonder how some of those questions will be asked. I am kind of interested in that—'1 to 10, how much do you love your kitten?'. I reckon that will be somewhat skewed data. It will allow the government to better prioritise and develop reforms or supports that will genuinely benefit Victoria's pets, their owners and the Victorian animal welfare sector so that we too can make sure we are doing some very proactive planning into the years ahead. This pet census, the first ever, is well supported throughout the animal welfare sector, with the CEO of the RSPCA, Dr Liz Walker, saying:

Pets matter to people, so we support the implementation of a pet census knowing it will provide vital data to support targeted initiatives that will help Victorians better care for their pets ...

I have just got some final remarks regarding cat management. The Andrews Labor government has recognised the need to develop a cat management strategy to promote responsible cat ownership, and the budget has included funds to support just that. The cat management strategy will reduce the burden for local councils and improve the toolbox for best practice management techniques as well as data collection and sharing. It will protect biodiversity and animal welfare with a focus on shared

responsibility across local communities, councils, stakeholders in the animal welfare sector and public land managers, resulting in less wildlife killed by cats and fewer cats impounded and euthanised. It will reduce the cost of shelters and pounds through lower cat impoundment and euthanasia and improved adoption rates and reduce nuisance cat issues such as spraying, fighting and trespass through improved levels of responsible cat ownership and cat containment as well as registration and compliance. There is more to be said on that, but I know that other speakers here in this place are waiting eagerly to make very considered contributions to this important piece before us today, so I will leave it at that.

**Ms TAYLOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (18:55): I am very pleased to speak on this motion today. Without a doubt Mr Meddick is certainly incredibly selfless when it comes to the protection of animals, and I commend him for his incredible work in this space. It is relentless in the best sense, and his devotion is profound. So, well done to him. We are all the better for it.

In thinking about vets I was thinking about the many times in people's lives when they take their pets to them. In my case currently it is Ruby and Sophie. They are delightful. They are now 14, and I am grateful for every day that I have with them because you do not know, they are getting to that upper end. I do not want to think about that, so I just think about every precious day I have with them and how much they mean to me personally. I can therefore relate to how much animals mean to so many people in so many ways. But I think, as has been shared, it is not so much about how much they mean to me but their precious right to be who they are as pets and to be honoured and to live happy lives—so thinking about the animals and the fact that they do not have to earn their value as such, they are valuable because they exist. I just wanted to clarify that point as well. But they bring me incredible joy.

I will get to some further and perhaps more significant points with regard to the motion, but I think of those very precious times at 2 in the morning, 3 in the morning when you take your pet to the vet and there they are in that vet's hands, and there is just so much responsibility. They can feel your emotion and the intensity of it, and when they can bring about an outcome that literally saves the life of your pet, it just means so much. So I very much appreciate, as I think and hope everyone here would, just how important it is that we do the right thing by animals across our state and across the globe as well.

I know that certainly animal welfare is absolutely a priority for our government. We know the community expects us to do the right thing by animals in our homes, in our community, on our farms and within various industries. I think the way the relationship between animals and human beings is evolving is a good thing. That is not to say there has not always been love and affection for animals, but I do believe that probably even as a result of people like David Attenborough, who really talk about nature and also that symbiotic relationship with animals and species, that really is perhaps moving, shaping and ameliorating the way that we relate to animals and species and respect their very precious place on our very delicate planet.

There are a couple of points that I want to raise. Firstly, I commend the Taskforce on Rehoming Pets. I would like to thank Mr Meddick as chair along with our esteemed colleagues Mr Gary Maas and Ms Maree Edwards, who have spearheaded this task force and provided 17 recommendations to government on how to improve pet welfare in Victoria. This is certainly a terrific step forward. We know the 2022–23 budget investment will support the implementation of the task force's 17 recommendations, which is a really important outcome, including developing a regulatory framework for the sector. Regulation of the pet rehoming sector will ensure pet welfare is protected at every step of the rehoming process. It will also ensure government appropriately supports the rehoming sector to provide consistently high standards of care, keeping pace with community expectations. We come back to that theme of the way people as a whole are viewing animals. I do not want to overgeneralise here because obviously there are different perspectives, but on the whole I would like to think we are moving forward in the relationship between humans and animals.

Growth of the pet rehoming sector has reached a point where government regulation and oversight are now required. This is a good thing. The Victorian government is committed to working with the sector to deliver reforms that will improve and better support animal welfare and rehoming outcomes.

There are a couple of other points that I do want to raise. It is interesting how far and wide free TAFE goes and what it can really translate into. There are benefits and elements that even I had not considered, but when you think about what it can mean even for enhancing veterinary care—yes, we know that over 115 000 Victorians have enrolled in free TAFE since it was introduced in 2019, and I will explain the relevance to this subject matter very quickly. That is over \$281 million saved in course fees for Victorians, so it is making it affordable and accessible. We know free TAFE is delivering a pipeline of skilled workers in Victoria, and this government will continue to review the list each year to make sure it is aligned with what the economy needs. How does this relate to the motion and the subject matter that we are talking about right now? In response to economic and skills needs the certificate IV in veterinary nursing was added to the free TAFE list from 2022, so that is certainly very significant. Also, in recognition of the importance of having highly skilled workers in this space we are making sure it is truly accessible and that people are able to afford to study this very important skill. That means more students getting the skills they need for the jobs being created within the animal welfare sector. An added bonus of having the policy of free TAFE is really targeting the skills that our community needs. Obviously with regard to the motion we know there certainly is a demand and it does need to be met, so it is good to see that free TAFE is helping to meet some of those aspects of what is being discussed here today.

I know that both the Minister for Agriculture, the Honourable Gayle Tierney, and the Minister for Environment and Climate Action, the Honourable Lily D'Ambrosio, are keen to see the modernisation of legislation that will protect and care for Victoria's animals and wildlife. Hence we can see there is a continuing theme in the discussion today about the evolution of the way that we—and when I say 'we' I should be fairly careful with that, because we are all individuals—human beings relate to animals, and this is very important. We obviously have invested in a number of initiatives, but there is a lot more work to do—and that is probably understating it to say the least, because obviously there are too many cases of animals who are maltreated, and certainly it is heartbreaking. It is heartbreaking when you hear about it or see it—see it on social media or see it in real life—and it is always a relief and I feel heartened when I see people who take genuinely good care of animals, whether it be in more of a farming situation or whether it be in their personal lives at home, because it is a win-win. Obviously the animal is being honoured, and that is the most important thing, but secondly we are all much happier as a result, because if we see happy animals it makes us feel good too, doesn't it? It is a symbiotic relationship. First and foremost, prioritising the animals, their welfare, their safety and their happiness has flow-on effects, and of course balancing the various species on the planet is critical when we are looking at the connectivity between animals and our precious planet in order to keep the balance of our ecosystems as well.

It goes without saying that we recognise the importance of the role that animals play, and I think also it is that unconditional love. It makes them extremely vulnerable as well, which is a precious thing, but it is that unconditional love. Humans can learn so much from animals. I know myself—

**Ms Shing:** Hear, hear!

**Ms TAYLOR:** Well, it is true, isn't it? You come home at the end of the day—and I am over-personalising it a little bit, but I just look at my animals sometimes and I think, 'You're so lovely', and it makes you feel like—

**Ms Shing:** Perspective.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Yes, it is perspective. That is right. And I think it inspires you to be a better person as well. And they have to survive, so I know that there are times when they are cheeky and they do things they probably should not, but it is a survival mechanism and I respect that. But at the end of the

day there is that sense of innocence and purity. I am going on a tangent, aren't I? I am getting distracted because I am thinking about my animals, which I really love.

I know that Mr Meddick would probably like to sum up, so I think if I just tidy up right there, everyone is going to be very happy. I commend the motion.

**Mr MEDDICK** (Western Victoria) (19:05): Firstly I want to thank all members for their very thoughtful contributions this afternoon. I just wanted to make one quick point, though, first of all. Initially I was quite upset to hear that Minister Shing would not be making a contribution this afternoon, but then I had the thought and the realisation that, well, that is because those on the government benches understand that if we allowed Ms Shing to talk about it, then we would be here until next week, because we would not stop hearing, and quite rightly, about the love that she has for her donkeys and her greyhounds, and that would be perfectly understandable.

**Mrs McArthur**: Get to the point, Andy.

**Mr MEDDICK**: I will.

**Ms Shing**: On a point of order, Acting President, I take issue with the way in which Mr Meddick has characterised my zeal for animal welfare as being something that would only take a week to discuss were this chamber to continue to sit, so on that basis I would ask that you withdraw or perhaps couch it in more enthusiastic terms, Mr Meddick. Thank you.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Mr Bourman)**: Thank you, Minister Shing. Whilst we all know that is 100 per cent true, that is not a point of order.

**Mr MEDDICK**: It would be true to say that today I have spent a significant amount of time on the phone fielding media questions about this motion from all over the country. One of the questions that they have asked me is, 'Well, surely this is going to cost a significant amount of money?'. And I agree—yes, it will. Yes, it will, but we are trying to fix a broken system. The cost of doing nothing would be significantly greater, especially when we try to project down the track three, four or maybe even five years. This would be a system that then would need rebuilding right from the ground up, and the cost would be hundreds if not thousands of times higher.

In summing up, the final message I would like to make is that we have a social obligation to society where the taxes of all contribute to the services provided to all, regardless of whether they access that service themselves or not. A caring society does so without hesitation, without reservation, because when one is uplifted we are all uplifted. In a moment in our history where the cult of us versus others is growing, in a climate of increasing division, this motion is a chance, an opportunity, for us all to grasp the concept with both hands that it costs us nothing by comparison to doing nothing when we simply afford others the same that we afford ourselves. These non-human animals are not divided along political lines, but they certainly are affected by them, and they do not have to be.

**Motion agreed to.**

### CONFINED SPACE RESCUE EQUIPMENT

**Mr MEDDICK** (Western Victoria) (19:08): I move:

That this house:

(1) recognises:

- (a) trenches and confined spaces are a unique and highly dangerous work environment;
- (b) trenches and confined spaces have been responsible for injury and death due to collapse, atmospheric poisoning and suffocation;
- (c) that Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) in the western and north-western regions of Victoria do not possess the correct equipment to conduct timely and safe rescues in both trench collapse and confined space emergencies, putting both workers and first responders at risk;