

Are we fit for the future?

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There is growing complexity in delivering services in the veterinary profession now and in the future. There are trends which are both exciting and daunting. The increasing availability of technology provides lots of opportunities for the future, yet pressure for global resources, our expectation around our hours of operation, poor support staff remuneration, and staff retention, has a cost to the people who deliver these services.

The squeeze

Using the funnel as a model (*The Natural Step*), we can see at a global, national or local level where the potential areas are where a specific population, business or individual is going to feel the drivers of change in the future. The funnel model below illustrates clearly the global challenges we face (*The Natural Step*, *The Story of Stuff Project*; *Footprint Network*; *Population Connection*; *Climate Change*; *Happiness Project*; *Wikipedia*).

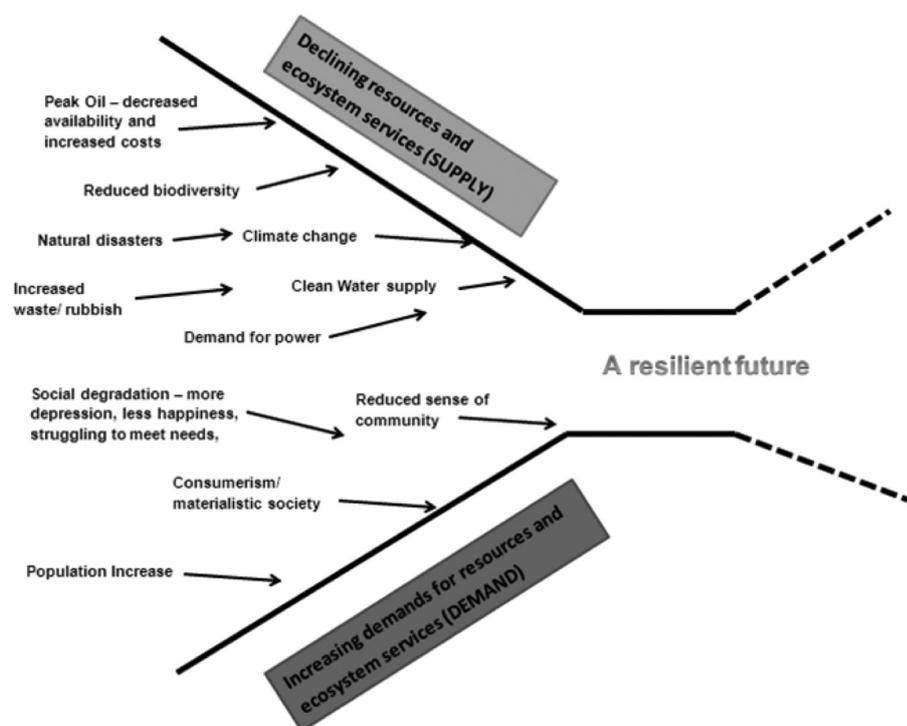


Figure 1. Funnel model of global challenges

It is useful to think globally about all these facts, however we need to think and act locally in our own backyard to make changes to the way we operate, not only personally but within the veterinary profession. We also have a responsibility to share the knowledge with our friends, colleagues and peers to work together to produce creative solutions.

If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos. – Edward O. Wilson (Ecohearth)

Focusing on our own veterinary businesses that we either own or are employed in, using the funnel model, this is the squeeze as I see it for a typical companion animal veterinary clinic:

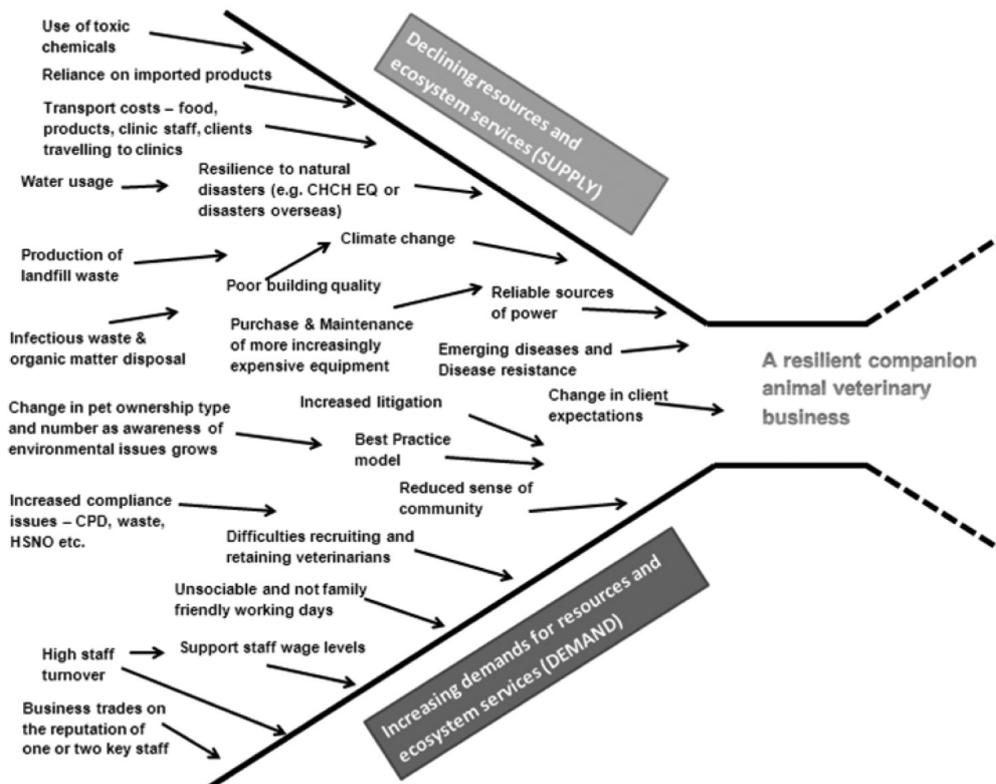


Figure 2. Funnel model of companion animal veterinary clinic challenges

A similar model could easily be produced for a typical mixed or large animal practice. Many of the issues will be similar; however they also have their own unique features and challenges.

So what is fit for the future?

In terms of the companion animal veterinary industry, veterinarians and their support staff are in the business of maintaining healthy companions for their owners. There is immense social good in this. There is an enormous amount of evidence that supports the high value of pets in terms of people personal well-being (*Wells D; Australian Companion Animal Council*). Personal and social well-being is very much part of a sustainable future (*P2P Foundation*).

So, in our industry, being fit for the future is continuing to maintain healthy pets and production animals and make money, while providing a good place to work, supporting the local community including its animals and adding value to the local environment.

Some inspirational stories to read about

There are many awesome examples of people working to be fit for the future. Some relevant examples include:

1. **Tasman Bay Vets** (*Tasman Bay Vets sustainable business policy*): Paula Short BVSc and her team have been working together in recent years to improve the sustainability of their business. By engaging the team, Paula has ensured buy in from her staff. They are continuing their journey to become fit for the future. This provides inspiration that local veterinary clinics can make a difference.
2. **Queenstown Lakes biodiesel consortium** (*Otago Polytechnic*): A group of key business partners came together to solve the problem of reliance on imported fossil fuels. The first step was achieved in 2010 of 20% biodiesel (B20). This project is ongoing and has a target of vehicles running of 100% biodiesel (B100). Fuel is essential to the veterinary industry, particularly large animal practice. Local initiatives, like this one, can reduce reliance on imported options.
3. **Virox** (*Virox*): Using accelerated hydrogen peroxide products, free of volatile organic carbons (VOCs), which contribute greenhouse gases, this company is committed to significant reductions in environmental impact, while still maintaining the health and safety of users and animals. They are also very responsive to questions about their policies and procedures around the topic of supply chain and environmental sustainability.
4. **Interface Flooring** (*Interface Flooring*): This international company shifted from being a traditional carpet manufacturer, that produced a large amount of waste, and used and discharged copious quantities of toxic chemicals, to a fully cyclic production system. New initiatives including limited waste products, using random pattern carpet squares and a leasing model, have allowed them to retain control of their raw materials and ensure a cyclic production system. This shows that a major manufacturer can make a difference by changing how they operate. Our major manufacturers have the potential to do the same.
5. **Otago Polytechnic** (*Otago Polytechnic*): One of the leading education providers in the Polytechnic sector has undertaken to not only improve its own sustainability, but one of its strategic priorities is to ensure that every graduate attains the core competency of being able to think and act sustainably both in the local and global environment. As more education providers undertake this mandate, the graduates you employ will be more savvy in terms of the decisions they make and encourage you to make within the veterinary practice in terms of your journey towards the future.

In every difficult situation is potential value. Believe this, then begin looking for it. – Norman Vincent Peale

The business case for sustainable practice

Are you finding that customers are increasingly asking questions about what your business is doing for the environment? Research shows that customers and clients increasingly care about this. A display of social responsibility is now a key driver for both employees and customers.

Employees want an employer who cares about them and also about the environment. In these caring companies, employees will stay longer, reducing attrition and recruitment costs. Customers want to support businesses that care too - about their customers, their staff and the environment. From a business perspective there is an immediate benefit to investigating how to begin the journey to build a cyclical business that can create a marketing advantage. In addition, there other benefits such as reduced costs. For example, a better designed and insulated building will result in reduced overheads such as power, as well as reduced sick days and improved health and well-being of the staff (Kats, GH 2003).

Vision of a sustainable veterinary clinic

Each one of us could imagine a sustainable veterinary clinic, which will look different, but the principles of what is sustainable and fit for the future are the same. These can be illustrated using this flower diagram:

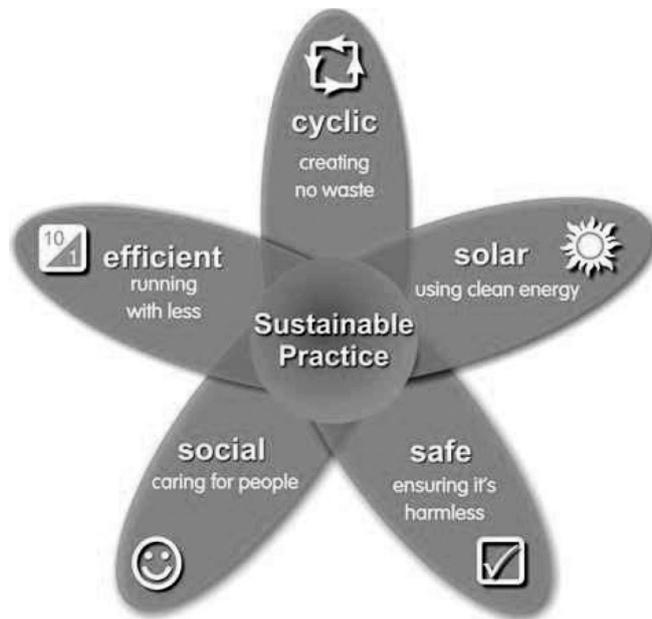


Figure 3. Flower model of sustainable practice (Henry S, Jackson M)

- Cyclic - creating no waste
Example: ensuring all equipment is recycled back into the system. For example, x-ray machines are designed to go back to the manufacturer for dismantling and reuse of all the parts. The veterinary industry relies heavily on major, often international suppliers. To get change relating to veterinary specific products, pressure will need to be applied to supply chains to improve their own practices.
- Solar - using clean energy
Example: ensuring the power source the veterinary clinic uses is renewable. This may include producing using technology such as harnessing energy from the sun using photovoltaic cells.
- Safe - ensuring its harmless
Example: selecting cleaning and disinfecting agents that are completely safe for the environment, both at end use and also during the production process.
- Sociable - caring for people
Example: paying support staff wages that allow them to live acceptably.
- Efficient - running with less
Example: water flow rates are reduced using technology to ensure enough water and pressure without so much being lost down the sink and waste grey water collected and recycled for toilets or outdoor watering.

Assessing products and services

When making purchasing decisions for your veterinary clinic that is working towards a future that respects the environment and its people as well as the bottom line, purchasing decisions need to look at the whole supply chain, not just the end product and its price.

Using the example of choosing a disinfectant we are going to use in a veterinary clinic, it is no longer acceptable to just ask the first 1 or 2 questions below to make a decision. The questioning must go deeper, and examine all parts of the supply chain.

1. Does the product kill the things we need it to?
2. Is the product safe for our staff to use with little or no safety gear?
3. What happens to the product as it breaks down? What are the breakdown products? How long does it take to breakdown? Just stating biodegradable is not enough - if this takes several days or weeks or even longer and the by-products are toxic, then this creates an issue. What are the effects on the environment of each breakdown product? What if I tip concentrated product down the drain?

4. Where is the product produced? Local would be better than international. If there are no local alternatives, would the company consider it being made under license in New Zealand, rather than being imported? We should aim for local wherever possible and when it's not able to be reproduced locally, consider how we could get to that point. At some stage transport costs or a major natural disaster is going to disrupt international supply chains.
5. Ask the manufacturer about the supply chain. There is no point choosing the product for its environmentally sound features at the consumer end if the supply chain is polluting the environment. What are the by-products of the production – are these cyclic? What goes to waste? Is the energy source for producing the product renewable?
6. Ask about product stewardship – How do they ensure that the leftovers from the consumers use are put back in the chain. For example the plastic bottles – are they collected and refilled? If it is not a product that is used like disinfectant, you would be asking about this in terms of returning the product (e.g. an x-ray machine) to the manufacturer for dismantling and reuse.
7. Ask about the company's philosophy when it comes to social aspects. Do they provide a work environment that enables people to meet their fundamental needs? (P2P Foundation).

You could design similar questions for any item of equipment or product you use or sell in the veterinary clinic – for example the x-ray machine, pet food, syringes, computer equipment.

Making a difference in your business

The focus in this section is on the veterinary clinic itself - its staff and the business. The ideas below are designed to show how some simple and effective changes can be made often very easily. This does not form an exclusive list. Some of these issues can be easily resolved:

1. **Review your power supplier:** Are they providing power using green energy sources? Are they investing money and time into development of further truly green energy? Ensure you are with a power company that has the right values.
2. **Look at your washing and drying processes:** Changing from towels to polar fleece bedding can reduce the number of loads of washing a day, it dries quickly, lasts a long time and is recycled material. Ensuring you have a washing line outside in a sunny area, to reduce the use of a dryer and purchasing a water efficient washing machine next time you need one.
3. **Change all you light bulbs** to energy efficient ones, and only turn them on when required.
4. **Follow the principles of reduce/reuse/recycle in that order:** Reduce your use of products where you can, reuse what you can and recycle anything you have that can no longer be reused. Before you send anything to landfill, check thoroughly that the item cannot be recycled. Often things you don't think are recyclable actually are, so if an option is not immediately available do some research. For example it is possible to recycle polystyrene packaging.
5. **For veterinary clinics using vehicles:** Train your receptionist to book non-urgent appointments with reduced driving in mind and ensure staff are trained in efficient driving techniques.
6. **Provide a bike stand:** Encourage people to cycle to work.
7. **Install water efficient taps** to reduce the flow of water without affecting the pressure, and use a foot pedal on your taps in the surgical scrub bay.
8. **Provide a water filter:** Encourages people to refill water containers rather than buying bottled water (The Story of Stuff project).
9. **Plant an edible garden:** Encourage staff to look after it and take ownership of it. (P2P Foundation). These don't have to be high maintenance. Employ a landscape designer who specialises in edible gardens to assist with the design. Ensure the garden design provides a peaceful reflection area for grieving clients too (Edible Gardens).
10. **Provide a Bokashi bucket to deal with lunch waste:** Encourage staff to bring their own lunch to work in waste free lunch boxes. The bokashi bucket will provide a means to get rid of food waste. Use the products of the bokashi bucket on the garden (Zingbokashi).

Celebrate your successes

Engage your staff or work colleagues in the journey and celebrate all the success stories even the little ones. The more staff on board the more successful it will be. For all of this it is essential that you promote your successes – it's a great marketing opportunity. Make sure this marketing involves good use of social media. Social media is a marketing phenomenon (Social Media Revolution 2) which is only going to get bigger. For a successful business of the future you need to be on board.

Some of the issues come with bigger challenges:

Depending on your business, the order that you approach these is likely to vary.

- 11. Examine the social sides of veterinary clinic dynamics and staff value:** Get familiar with Max-Neefs Model of Human Scale development (P2P Foundation). Run a work environment survey and take seriously the results. Implement change based on the results.
- 12. Change the purchasing habits of the veterinary clinic for toys/bowls and other products sold over the counter:** Select products that are New Zealand made and designed to last.
- 13. Transport:** In addition to booking and driving efficiencies mentioned above, examine the vehicle fleet and fuel used. There are opportunities for significant efficiencies.
- 14. Building design:** Depending on the building it might be a retrofit, or a rebuild. Employ an expert in sustainable building design to look at your premises.
- 15. Reduce the moisture in the air:** Take all the washing outside and install an HRV system or something similar if required. This improves the quality of the air and reduces the need for so much heating/cooling. Staff will also be healthier in a drier environment.
- 16. Provide a shower and bedroom at the veterinary clinic for overnight stays** if there is no after-hours and animals remain hospitalised overnight. The shower will be useful for staff who cycle to work or those who may run during a lunch break for example.
- 17. Undertake an energy audit:** Create efficiencies in your energy use system, to reduce the overall power required. This has not only environmental savings, but direct business savings too.
- 18. Install a power generation system** such as photovoltaic panels. Seek qualified professional advice on what is best for your building/situation.
- 19. Recycle grey water and collect rain water** for running through the toilets and/or watering gardens.
- 20. Examine all potential environmental toxins used within the veterinary clinic:** Use the questions listed earlier in this paper, to help investigate the product and seek alternatives.
- 21. Examine pet food supply:** Most of our premium brands are made overseas and imported. Are there equivalent local alternatives or can the multi-national companies change the way they do business? Why can't the recipe that has been researched and developed in the USA be made locally in New Zealand for the local market using locally sourced ingredients?
- 22. Syringes:** Can we as an industry find a way that syringes are able to be recycled into another recyclable product or can they be collected by a company that is set up to clean, repair and re-sterilise. Is that acceptable? Could we go back to glass syringes? Perhaps a plant based syringe could be developed for single use that is able to be composted?

This is not an exclusive list towards the goal of “a veterinary clinic that is fit for the future” but is a starting point to realising the vision and ensuring that we and future generations, our children, grandchildren and their grandchildren all have a future.

In order to become fully engaged in this transformational change I would recommend undertaking a full sustainable business audit, using recognised planning and implementation tools to ensure the vision is clear and a process is put in place to work effectively towards the vision. Ensure you build in the ability to monitor any implementations and/or changes. I would also recommend a cohesive approach from the profession, as we all face the same issues, and by working together, we can resolve a number of the bigger issues.

Summary

The future is going to look vastly different from the reality today. Businesses need to strategically plan for this new future and be making the changes now rather than playing catch up. These changes are essential for the future - the people, the business and the environment. It is an enormous opportunity to grow your business, while respecting the environment.

Understand the challenges that we all face, be inspired by the stories of success and begin the journey to a successful and brighter future that benefits the environment, the people, the business and of course the animals.

There are no great people in this world, only great challenges which ordinary people rise to meet. - William Frederick Halsey, Jr.

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