

EDITORIAL:

DECLINING INTEREST AMONG VETERINARY GRADUATES IN PRODUCTION ANIMAL, WILDLIFE, AND STATE VETERINARY SERVICES IN SRI LANKA: POSSIBLE CAUSES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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In recent years, there has been a significant decline in the willingness of veterinary graduates in Sri Lanka to join the state veterinary service as well as the livestock and poultry production sectors. As professionals responsible for safeguarding animal health, food security, and supporting rural livelihoods, we must critically examine why young veterinarians are becoming hesitant to pursue careers in these vital fields for national development. Coincidentally, a decline in interest in careers related to wildlife health and conservation within the public sector is also becoming evident. This trend raises concerns about Sri Lanka's future capacity to sustain livestock production, manage animal diseases effectively, and conserve wildlife.

In this regard, we need to address the following questions.

- Is the inadequate remuneration, particularly in relation to workload and professional responsibility, a major deterrent for young veterinarians considering state and livestock-oriented careers?
- Do the demanding field conditions, rural postings with limited infrastructure, and insufficient occupational safety discourage graduates from entering these sectors?
- Have limitations in undergraduate practical training led to a lack of confidence among graduates to engage in production animal or wildlife practice?
- Do unclear career progression pathways, limited opportunities for

continuing professional development, a lack of performance appraisal and reward system, and weak mentorship structures contribute to early professional dissatisfaction?

Economic comparisons within the profession are inevitable, and they may also play a significantly influential role. As graduates observe the rapid financial growth and expanding urban demand associated with companion animal practice, they may perceive livestock-oriented, wildlife-related, and state sector careers as less financially rewarding and less sustainable in the long term. The apparent disparity in income potential and lifestyle opportunities may therefore further divert talented young veterinarians away from production animal systems, wildlife conservation, and public service.

Social perceptions within the profession may also contribute to this shift. Livestock-oriented practice and wildlife health management may receive less recognition in comparison with companion animal services or corporate employment. In the absence of adequate professional recognition, supportive working environments, and long-term career security, it is understandable that many graduates proactively seek postgraduate training and employment opportunities overseas.

Should this trend continue, Sri Lanka risks a critical shortage of veterinarians in sectors crucial for sustainable livestock production, wildlife health management and conservation, disease surveillance, and

public health protection. The implications of such a shortage extend beyond the veterinary profession itself, potentially affecting national food security, rural development, biodiversity conservation, and the country's ability to respond effectively to emerging animal and zoonotic diseases.

Addressing this challenge requires urgent and coordinated systemic reforms with clear policy direction and sustained political commitment. Competitive salary structures, rural service incentives, and transparent career advancement frameworks must be prioritised within both the state veterinary service and related industries. Mechanisms to reduce income disparities, such as performance-based incentives and public-private partnerships should be seriously considered. In parallel with these employment-related changes, veterinary undergraduate curricula should be further strengthened through enhanced field-based training, stronger industry and wildlife-sector partnerships, and structured mentorship programmes that build confidence in production animal and wildlife practice.

Equally important is sustained investment in safe working environments, modern diagnostic and clinical facilities and accessible continuing professional development opportunities. Such measures are essential not only to attract graduates to these sectors but also to improve professional satisfaction and long term retention.

Ultimately, the profession must move beyond merely recognising this emerging trend. We must ask what concrete actions are we prepared to implement to ensure that these vital sectors remain attractive and viable career pathways for future veterinarians. The long term strength of Sri Lanka's veterinary services and the sustainability of its livestock industries, wildlife resources, and public health systems will depend on the collective willingness of both the profession and national leadership to respond with foresight, commitment, and decisive action.