



## **MEDIA JOURNALISM ENTRY**

**CATEGORY:** Sound/Vision Journalism Award

**ENTRY TITLE:** Sick As A Dog podcast: An industry in crisis

**NAME OF APPLICANT:** Caroline Winter

**ORGANISATION:** PodTalk.

## The MHS Awards entry 2023: Part B



**Title of entry:** Sick As A Dog podcast: An industry in crisis

**Date of Publication/Broadcast:** This is an 8-part series released weekly from 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023 – 18<sup>th</sup> May 2023.

**Duration:** Each episode runs approx. 30mins (4 hours across the series) – I have included episode 1 and 3 with this submission.

**2023 Category Name:** Sound/Vision Journalism Award

**Applicants Name:** Caroline Winter – PodTalk.

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### Link to story/series

This podcast and associated articles and information are published on the [Sick As A Dog podcast website](#)

The series can also be accessed across these popular podcast apps (links will take you directly to the podcast) [Apple Podcasts](#) | [Spotify](#) | [Google Podcasts](#) | [iHeart](#) | [Spreaker](#) | [Podchaser](#)

### Synopsis

One life is lost to suicide every 12 weeks. Burnout and quitting are common. Staff shortages are severe and abuse from clients is persistent. These are just some of the complex issues affecting the veterinary industry.

Sick As A Dog is a podcast series about an industry in crisis - a crisis that is killing the people who care for our animals. Whether you are a pet owner, wildlife lover, consumer of animal products or work in the industry, this is for you and about you.

It is a whole of community issue, that without change could have dire consequences for us all.

This is a deep dive into the mental health crisis in the vet profession. It shines a spotlight on the many challenges, but also explores the potential solutions that exist - solutions that you and I are very much a part of.

## Supplied audio guide

As mentioned above, this is an 8-part series released weekly from 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023 – 18<sup>th</sup> May 2023 including a trailer.

For judging purposes, I am submitting the following two episodes. Please use the links provided below to go directly to those episodes.

### [Sick As A Dog Episode 1 – Breaking Point](#)

Show notes:

Vets sign up to save animals, never thinking they might need saving themselves. Dr Sophie Putland was one of those – a passionate, talented young vet who hit breaking point with devastating consequences.

Sadly, her story is not unique and this episode establishes the gravity of an industry in crisis, one where the mental load is enormous, burnout and quitting are common, the suicide rate is higher than the general population, staff shortages are severe and abuse from clients is persistent.

Sick As A Dog investigates an industry in crisis – uncovering issues and seeking solutions. As community members, pet owners, meat eaters and wildlife lovers these issues affect us all. Discover how we can all be part of the change.

REMINDER: Take care when listening. If you or anyone you know needs help, please reach out. In Australia you can contact Lifeline by phone on 13 11 14 (24/7); Lifeline via text on 0477 13 11 14 (24/7); Suicide Callback Service 1300 659 467.

### [Sick As A Dog Episode 3 – In Their Shoes](#)

Show notes:

They get kicked, bitten, spat on and some spend their days with their arm up an animal's rectum. But have you ever wondered what it's like on the frontline for veterinarians? The thrill of complex animal medicine and those life and death moments.

Let's take a walk in their shoes and spend a night at an emergency animal hospital where vets and vet nurses work hard and fast to save lives, solve problems, all while dealing with the pressures of an industry in crisis.

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## Supporting material

The Sick As A Dog Podcast was partly funded by the Meta Australian News Fund - Public Interest Journalism Fund 2021-2022, and administered by the Walkley Foundation.

To secure the funding, I faced a rigorous application process where I had to demonstrate the rationale for the project, set out timelines, milestones, outcomes, a budget, and also detail how it would support public interest journalism, along with the kind of public interest impact or benefits that would likely be generated.

### **The pitch**

Sick As A Dog is a podcast series investigating an industry in crisis.

Over 6-8 episodes I will take a deep dive into the issues facing the veterinary industry and the impact that has on its people, the animals they care for, the community they serve and the serious ramifications those issues are having on life, food security and animal welfare.

Veterinarians are taking their own lives at a rate four times that of the general population.

Access to lethal drugs and daily interactions with euthanasia are among the catalysts, along with abuse from clients, low pay, long-hours and burnout, with 30% of vets saying they will leave the industry within five years.

To compound this this, there is an endemic shortage of vets trying to care for pets, farm animals and wildlife which has only worsened due to the pandemic puppy boom and a dearth of skilled migrants coming to Australia.

The litany of issues plaguing vets are not new, but they are worsening and if not addressed, the profession will become unviable, threatening clinical and vet services across the country, as well as animal welfare and food security.

This investigation hopes to expose the short comings within the industry, highlight stories of heartache and triumph from the city to the bush and explore the financial, political and community pressure that weighs heavily on those that care for our animals.

This audio journey will shine a spotlight on the challenges and potential solutions of an industry battling to survive.

### **The rationale**

This is not just an industry in crisis, but a whole of community problem. This is about valuing and understanding the role Vets play in caring for all animals.

While stories are occasionally done around some of these issues, what is needed is a dedicated investigation highlighting the systematic failures that exist and importantly the changes required across industry, education, politics and the community, to fix the problems plaguing and endangering the profession and lives.

This is more relevant than ever before. Not only is the industry experiencing its greatest shortage of Vets in its history, the number of pets in Australian households has skyrocketed. Over two thirds of Australian homes have a pet and COVID has only added to that with more than two million homes acquiring a pet since start of the pandemic.

All these millions of pets need caring for. Not to mention, sick or injured wildlife or those caught in natural disasters, as well as livestock and other farm animals, crucial to food security and exports.

Who will care for them in the future and what will it mean for the psyche and economy of a nation that loves and relies on animals in myriad ways?

Veterinarians are stressed, underpaid and overworked, and many exit the profession out of exhaustion. Animal practices are closing, leaving regional and rural towns without anywhere to turn and as a result there are Vet shortages across the nation. Meanwhile the expectations of pet owners around cost and care is ending in abuse, anger and worse.

I was fortunate to be awarded the funding in March 2022 and over the next 12 months, I criss-crossed the nation from regional towns to big cities, and listened to many stories and perspectives of working in or with the veterinary profession.

This is an independent project which has been solely researched, interviewed, scripted, hosted and edited by me. I also created the cover art and the website and have been involved in all distribution of the podcast, social media and media coverage gained as part of the project – which to date has included [ABC Radio](#), [The Quicky Podcast](#) and [The Advertiser](#).

This series began as an investigative series through character driven narration but has gathered momentum and support from external organisations and groups.

As a result, I have teamed up with Kate and Garry Putland who lost their daughter Dr Sophie Putland to suicide, and who featured in Episode 1, to help bring about change through [Sophie's Legacy](#).

### Audience and response

At the time of this entry, three of the eight episodes have been released and the podcast was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> on the Australian Apple documentary podcast charts among some big media organisations including ABC, Mamamia and American Public Media.

I have been overwhelmed and humbled by the support the series has received to date, from dozens of listeners, some vets and vet nurses, as well as everyday people.

### Comments via Apple Podcast reviews include:

“What a beautiful and heartbreaking podcast. Caroline does an amazing job navigating the story.”

“Just listened to Ep 1 and tears rolling down my face. With a daughter studying to be a vet at the same University Sophie Putland attended, this really hits home. Thank you so much Caroline for shining a light on this industry in such a beautiful and thoughtful way. Let's hope it makes a positive difference. And people, please be kind to your vet - you need them!”

“We have listened to episodes 1 & 2 which explore the harsh realities of working in this very complex industry. Our Vets deserve so much more respect given their 6 years of study & \$130k HECS debt to achieve their qualifications for a starting salary of \$53k. Our son Cam & daughter-in-law feature in episode 2 & we are so proud of their honesty & courage to speak about their challenges. Caroline Winter is an excellent journalist who subtly & humbly investigates the harsh reality of a profession from which Vets are leaving in droves. We encourage everyone to listen as the industry is laid bare”

“Thank you Caroline for taking on this important issue and showing us that being a vet is not all fluffy cats and cute dogs. It's often an underpaid, stressful slog and our precious vets and staff are suffering to the extent they're in danger physically and mentally. Not one more vet should take their own life!”

### Emails received include:

“Thank you and thank you for bringing attention to the difficulties our profession faces.”

“It is refreshing and validating for the systemic issues being called out, instead of individual's being blamed as the problem themselves/being labelled as not being tough enough to work in the space.”

“Nobody should have to suffer for doing a job they love and I sincerely hope that by you doing so, you can create the discussions needed that will hopefully lead to some positive initiatives being implemented!”

“Like most Veterinarians, I also have known far too many veterinarians and nurses who have committed suicide. You are right, the industry is in crisis for all the reasons you mentioned in your first podcast. The industry needs significant structural adjustment if it is going to become a profession where people can safely and happily pursue a lifelong career, which for many began as a calling during their early teenage years.”

I am immensely proud of the impact this series has had to date and very much hope the momentum continues as episodes are released and the conversation around this crisis gets louder.