My aim in preparing this paper has been to look at some issues that pertain specifically to WOMEN in RURAL vet practices. Much has been written about female veterinarians, and likewise rural practice, but it seems that there is considerably less literature specific to a combination of the two subjects. In order to gather some meaningful data on this subject, I have accessed the available literature on trends in veterinary practice by people like Trevor Heath. But to access more “grass roots” data, opinions and feelings I have gone directly to the most reliable source - female vets who are out there at the coalface of rural practice in Australia.

The Statistics...

The most up to date hard data on veterinary demographic trends I could find are those collected by the NSW VPB as part of the annual return that each registered vet in NSW has to do. No other state seems to collect this sort of gender information, but I would expect the data to be broadly representative of the situation across all of the Australian states.

The 2008 statistics reveal the following:

- 15.5% of practising vets in the state are females who work in the country
- 24% of the <30 year olds (recent graduates) are rural female vets
- This figure drops steadily through the age range finishing at the 50 – 60 year old category, where rural female vets account for 9.5% of the demographic. I question whether this is a true reflection of women leaving rural vet practice or just that there were far less women graduates 40 years ago?
- Looking at the new/recent graduates (<30 years old) reveals that 60% of them work in private practice. This fits with the current graduate gender balance ie. 70% are female – 2/3 of which choose city practice, and 1/3 country.

Statistics like those above, whilst valuable, only tell us a part of the story. In order to gauge what rural female vets really think about their jobs the following questions were put to a cross section
of predominantly current, but sometimes ex, rural female practitioners. I’ve also added my own thoughts.

**Why do some female vets choose to work in or own a rural vet practice?**

- Having grown up in a rural area (with that being a positive experience) and wanting to get back to the perceived “idyl” of a small, friendly, community-focussed town surrounded by wide open spaces. Heath (2005) lends weight to this argument: he found that 10 years out from vet school mixed practices were retaining country “born and bred” vets at twice the rate of their city counterparts. Quite a few of the vets I spoke to were very keen to get back to the country after their time at vet school in the city.

- The desire to use the ENTIRE base of knowledge they’ve built up at vet school, not just that pertaining to one or two species.

- Some just “fall into it” when they marry a local.

- Taking advantage of a good business opportunity. Many of these women have bought into rural veterinary practices because they represent an excellent investment. A rural veterinary practice is often cheaper to buy & run and can “get you where you want to go financially” much quicker than a city based practice.

- The potential to achieve a better work – life balance. This was a controversial one, depending on who I asked. Some women felt that, compared to metropolitan practice, rural practice offered greater flexibility to be a mother, wife, bread winner & veterinary practitioner, whilst still “having a life”. This was not the case for all respondents though as discussed below.

**What is the hardest thing about being a WOMAN in rural vet practice (not just any vet in rural vet practice)? Is it different to being a man? Are you treated differently by clients or staff?**

- Juggling the needs of family with the needs of one’s clients and patients. The old work/life balance issue. However I believe that this is a hard thing for a woman in ANY veterinary practice – rural or otherwise.

- The ever present spectre of physical injury when doing LA work in particular. This is a problem for all LA vets, male or female. But respondents felt that, as females, they and their clients need to be even more conscious of the importance of good animal handling and restraint techniques and facilities and OH&S issues in general. Some respondents said that this factor either had or may well cause them to cease to provide LA services in their rural practices. This is a sad state of affairs as it not only leaves clients without a service (animal welfare issues too?) but many women really enjoy LA work and would miss the opportunity to do it.

- Convincing some clients that the female vet is just as useful to them in the paddock as the male vet (and not a second rater). This can be a difficult perception to overcome and happens, to an extent, in our practice too. (It is in no small way related to the previous point.) Overcoming it often needs to start with changing the attitudes of veterinary nurses and practice staff, as they tend to “protect” the female vets from the large animal work a bit more. Furthermore, if female, rural, mixed practice vets (particularly more recent graduates) are not given adequate exposure to a range of LA work during “routine hours”, how can they be expected to gain the skills and confidence (not to mention client trust) that is required to do competent LA emergency work after hours? On the flip side, young female graduates are often forgiven more, and receive greater accolades for a job well done compared to the males. In many large animal cases female vets are probably quicker to go for the sedative or surgical (ie caesarean) approach, which can be argued as being a better outcome for both
the patient (pain and stress management) and the vet (preventing injuries). We are much better at not putting our bodies on the line, but getting the job done just the same.

- The female rural vets I spoke to found that often it’s not being a WOMAN, it’s more one’s background or one’s experience and whether you can understand/relate to your rural clients and their relationships with their animals that can dictate client attitudes to you as a professional.

- Feeling like the only woman in a sea of men is frustrating. Graduate rural female vets I spoke to found that it helped if at least one of the principals is a woman, and has “trained” the clients into understanding that women can get the job done!! In the past, sexist attitudes of clients/bosses/staff have caused women to leave rural practice (Dewes, 2004) but none of the vets I spoke to perceived this to be a problem so I think attitudes are changing for the better.

- In times past, women vets (from an AVA branch perspective) were sometimes perceived by their male peers as having more “spare time” to put into branch jobs – secretary, writing submissions etc . Don’t think that’s the case anymore!!

- In a similar vein, often the management/book-keeping is seen to be the role of the woman partner in the practice, whereas the men can be perceived to be more just “the vet”.

**What is the BEST thing about being a woman in rural vet practice?**

- Being a well-respected female professional in the male-dominated primary industry sector is rewarding in itself. It’s great to prove to the skeptics that you can get the job done, and get results!

- Leading an outdoors lifestyle that meshes nicely with your job.

- Women tend to be naturally comfortable showing empathy and compassion for a client/patient’s situation and circumstances.

- And as one recent female graduate puts it... “you get to meet good looking, single graziers every day”!!!

**What are the advantages of being a female vet in the country vs the city?**

- Being aware (as an intuitive woman!) of the whole client/family/farm context of each patient in a small community can be more satisfying than the isolated dyad of a presenting client/patient in a city practice.

- The ability to combine one’s family life with one’s working life is possibly easier to achieve in the country. Clients realise that to have this great female as their vet they are more than willing to accept her children with her at work – breastfeeding, playing around the surgery, in the consult room and on farm visits.

**How has vet practice changed for female rural vets in the last 20 years?**

- Most rural female vets speak of doing less large animal work and more small animal work as the time passes since graduation. Several reasons for this – getting older and the body getting worn out, pregnancy, a greater fear of the riskier side of large animal work once becoming a mother (who will look after my family if I am injured?). However, farm animals are contributing less and less to the income of the average rural practice (55% in 1990, 37% in 2000 – Heath, Niethe 2000)

- Often doing less after hours work because of family commitments. Definitely seen more in multi-vet practices. NB The solo vets are still doing heaps of afterhours work, often with family in tow!
- Clients in rural areas are developing greater expectations of their veterinary service. Seen across the board in the veterinary profession, so rural clients are no different. Rural female vets are embracing this change and encouraging the expectation that rural vets need brains AND brawn! With the increase in “tree-changers” and client expectations we are finding that clients are more open to referral options, which helps us not to have to attempt to be experts at everything.
- Pets are increasingly becoming more valued in rural areas - this enables rural female small animal vets to expand their skills and value to a practice.

**How to survive as a woman in rural vet practice?**

- Have a life!! E.g. consider not opening on weekends (just be on call), shorten your opening hours, close for lunch. Many rural practices have little direct veterinary opposition so use this in your favour and don’t burn out! Change your hours to suit your family life, and the stage of your children’s lives.
- Train your husband/partner!! While ever there is a greater burden of domestic duties – childrearing, housework etc – on the female rural vet than on her partner she is far more likely to feel exhausted, stressed and overworked. If husband/partner can’t undertake some of these domestic duties, consider employing outside help – cleaners, nannies, book-keepers etc.
- Technology is your friend even moreso in rural practice – online databases/libraries, email, VIN, skype, digital cameras and videos, online continuing education, regional conferences and courses. It’s easy to become professionally isolated so don’t!
- Work in a multi-man practice. This again could be a recommendation across all veterinary practices, but in rural practices that MUST provide afterhours services (and have no emergency centres) it is even more important to share the afterhours load.
- If no options but to have a one-man veterinary practice, use the adage “do what you do do well”. There is no need to be a “James Herriot/Jack of all Trades”. A rural community is often happy to have ANY veterinary service, so if it is just smallies, or just horses, or only cows and pets that’s okay. If it’s difficult or impossible to get locums, it is possible to consider closing the door for a week or two occasionally to give yourself a break – just be sure to advertise the fact to your clients/community in advance and give them some alternative vet practices to call.
- Get involved in the community. Embrace the fact that you are going to be known by EVERYONE in town, and enjoy the sense of care.
- Keep your fees aligned to the rest of the profession. The annual Veterinary Fees survey by MPV consistently shows rural practices charging up to 50% less for a service than their city counterparts. Why should the same procedure (be it a bone plating, cat fight abscess or spey) cost less in the bush? Charge appropriately and pay those vets what they are worth! Dewes (2004) found that women vets in the bush are remunerated about 10% less than their city counterparts – yet Heath (2001) found very few complained about this.

All the female rural vets I spoke to would recommend rural practice as a career choice – even the ones who have now moved on to small animal city practices. Their over-riding sentiment was that of a genuine love for the job and the lifestyle that rural practice affords them as female vets. So why aren’t there more of us chicks in the sticks? The statistics tell us that there are significant numbers of girls graduating from vet science who are mad keen to head to the bush to start their careers. This is a huge positive for rural practice. Surely then the onus is on us, the “converted”, to be positive role models and mentors for these women. The challenge is to address the issues that have been discussed in this paper and to be proactive in ensuring a supportive, stimulating and rewarding rural practice environment that is tailored to the specific
requirements of female veterinarians. We need to use their great desire (often even greater than men’s) for a work-life balance to bring about change in our practices – more flexibility in hours, more part-time positions, better wages. We need to keep pushing our clients and ourselves to provide a safer working environment for women both in the clinic and in the paddock. And we must support these women in becoming competent mixed animal practitioners – whatever mix they choose to practice! More females than ever before will be graduating in the next few years – let’s get these chicks into the sticks to share the love and share the load!

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Thanks to the rural female vets who contributed their opinions to this discussion:

Mary-Jane Stutsel, Bourke/Cobar NSW Zoe Bagshaw, Mt Barker WA
Kate King, Hall ACT Nadine Allan, Gilgandra NSW
Mandy Carlon, Coonamble NSW Verena Joyce, Boonah QLD
Louise Mullemeister and Vicki Dunstan, Charleville QLD Jill Kelly, Dubbo NSW
Sam McMahon, Katherine NT Libby Price, Dirranbandi QLD