

An interview with Dr Mark Schipp,

OIE President and Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) of Australia

1. How did you get to where you are now?

I never really set out to be a vet, and certainly never set out to become the Chief Veterinary Officer of Australia. I originally graduated with a Biology degree and my father encouraged me to go back and study veterinary science - I had in mind a career of splendid isolation as a forest ranger. When I was close to graduating as a veterinarian, I soon realised in my small animal clinical rotation that clinical practice was not for me, so I joined the government.

At first, I was with the Western Australian Department of Agriculture as a District Veterinary Officer working all over that huge state. But the contracts shrunk from 12 months down to 1 month and I was about to get married and take out a 25-year mortgage, so I moved from state employment to the Commonwealth.

I worked in export abattoirs in Western Australia, Victoria and Tasmania for a few years before moving to Canberra, initially on a three-month trial, in our national export meat program. After a further period of time in Canberra, I was posted to Seoul, South Korea as an Australian Agriculture Counsellor covering the North Asia region. At that time, we had few overseas posts and so my official travels included audits in Thailand and Russia. My unofficial travel included a short holiday in North Korea!

From Seoul it was onto Beijing, China where I established the Agriculture office at the Australian Embassy. During this posting Australia and China were exploring a free trade agreement so I was frequently meeting and briefing the Prime Minister, Agriculture Ministers and Premiers and visiting trade delegations. All of this was pretty remarkable for someone who didn't quite know what to do next upon graduating from vet school!

When I returned to Australia I was promoted to the Senior Executive Service in the export meat program and then in 2011, I was asked to act as the Chief Veterinary Officer of Australia while they found a permanent appointment - I had not applied thinking you had to be an outstanding veterinarian to be the CVO! But I was appointed permanently shortly thereafter which was a great privilege.



Me hanging out with Arthur, a wiry-haired
Jack Russell Terrier!

In 2012, I attended the OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health) General Session for the first time as Australia's representative, where I was elected to the OIE Council. In 2015 I was elected as Vice President of the OIE Council, and in 2018 I was elected as President of the OIE World Assembly of Delegates.

2. What are some highs and lows about holding both positions at once?

Being OIE President is an enormous responsibility and opportunity. I have been greatly blessed to work with colleagues and the OIE Director General Dr Monique Eloit to develop the OIE's strategic direction for the next five years through the seventh strategic plan. I am very interested in improving international animal health outcomes, which I strive to do every day.

As the Australian CVO, I have some significant responsibilities including emergency animal disease preparedness and response, overseeing our national animal health system, scanning for emerging threats and opportunities, working with the Chief Medical Officer to lead Australia's response to antimicrobial resistance and fostering the veterinary profession in Australia and within this government department.

These two roles are complementary, but they are also both very demanding, and there are times, particularly during crises, when it can become challenging juggling the roles and responsibilities of both. I am very fortunate to have a small team of advisers who keep me in check and assist me whenever and wherever they can!

Travelling is also a big part of the job. Whether this be to OIE Council meetings and the General Session in Paris, regional conferences or to Australian states to present on topical issues, I am privileged to be able to visit countries I never thought I would visit and to represent both Australia and the OIE. Unfortunately, everywhere in the world is a long way from Australia.

3. What does a typical day look like for you?

Wouldn't it be lovely to have a typical day? Each day is different as we respond to emerging issues and opportunities. Recently we were coordinating the deployment of government vets to assist in the emergency bushfire response, in collaboration with jurisdictional Chief Veterinary Officers and alongside our Defence Forces.

In my President role, I met with members of the OIE Council via teleconference to discuss contingency arrangements for the 2020 OIE General Session due to COVID-19. I have also worked with OIE Council members on finalising the OIE's 7th Strategic Plan for 2021-2025, which focuses on standard-setting and capacity-building and helps deliver on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It is a great privilege to influence these initiatives that address global poverty and food security.

4. What are your top priorities as OIE President?

I came into the OIE President role with three main objectives:

The first was to improve good governance and transparency processes within the OIE. An international standard setting body needs to ensure its processes are transparent, participatory and fair, whether that is in the process of recognising a country's animal health status, assessing the performance of experts or the use of resources. Significant improvements have been made during the time I have worked with the OIE Council.

The second was to increase Member Country engagement in the processes of the OIE. When I joined the OIE as the Australian Delegate, I felt like the OIE was something that was done to me as member rather than something that was owned or directed by me as a member. Member country participation in the development of standards is critical if they are to adopt and apply those standards, and these standards are critical to human and animal health, international trade and the capacity of veterinary services. The patchy adoption of agreed OIE standards was an impetus to launch the OIE Observatory which will engage with all Member Countries to help them identify and rectify potential implementation barriers for OIE standards and guidelines.

My final priority was for veterinarians to have a greater voice in global discussions, such as on antimicrobial resistance and other One Health issues. Veterinarians are highly trained professionals that should be contributing at all levels of society. In Australia it was wonderful to see veterinarians stepping forward in response to the bushfires we experienced, and when diseases emerge such as COVID-19, veterinarians are uniquely placed to contribute to the solution.

5. Any advice for budding government vets?

I always tell students to remain open to opportunities in government veterinarian roles. You have so many options with a veterinary degree!

When I was a struggling vet student, I had no idea of the opportunities that would open up for me in terms of travel, responsibility and contribution. I have been very fortunate to represent Australia internationally and to work on issues of global significance. My work has affected multibillion-dollar industries and I have been able to make valuable contributions in multiple areas such as food safety and security, animal health and also Australia's national economy.

Good things will come to those who are enthusiastic, hard-working and team players. Remarkable careers within the public sector exist for vets that are open to such possibilities – go for it!

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