

Vets welcome upcoming council amid manpower, mental health challenges in sector

Announced on Oct 13, the veterinary council is set to be established by 2025 as a professional body under the National Parks Board. BY RENALD YEO

INDUSTRY players expect the new regulatory body for Singapore's vet sector to raise professional standards and provide legislative teeth against errant players.

They also hope the new council will take steps to improve working conditions for vets, and thus alleviate ongoing challenges in manpower and mental health, they told *The Business Times* (BT).

Announced on Oct 13, the veterinary council is set to be established by 2025 as a professional body under the National Parks Board (NParks).

It will be a welcome addition to the local scene, said Singapore Veterinary Association president Chow Haoing.

"We can have a more robust structure for the industry, and increase standards – which also comes with building a more resilient workforce," Dr Chow told BT.

Vets are currently licensed and regulated by NParks' Animal and Veterinary Service (AVS).

The new council will take over this responsibility, though AVS will continue to license and regulate vet clinics and animal-related businesses.

The council will maintain a registry of vet professionals and the activities that they are allowed to carry out. It will accredit vet training programmes and set out continuing education requirements.

It will also develop and review sectoral standards to provide greater clarity on the ethics and standards required of practitioners, as well as investigate cases of professional misconduct and take enforcement action.

About 1,000 to 1,500 vet professionals – vets, vet nurses and technicians – are expected to fall under the council's purview.

Apart from regulation, vets hope the new council will address industry-wide challenges.

These include the problem of non-vets doing the work of vets, such as performing cosmetic surgery on ornamental fishes.

Dr Chow hopes the council will address this with its regulatory



Chow Haoing (centre), president, Singapore Veterinary Association, at the Singapore Vet Show 2023. PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIIN

powers: "Unfortunately, without legislation and without strong, robust laws, there are limitations. Right now, we have zero control (over them)."

Another issue is a lack of manpower, which forces existing vets, vet nurses and technicians to work longer and more irregular hours, Dr Chow said.

This labour shortage is related to the mental health issues with which many vets struggle, he added.

These issues, in turn, stem primarily from poor treatment by pet owners, who sometimes have unrealistic expectations and take their frustrations out on vets, those working in the sector told BT.

The mental health struggles of vets, vet nurses and technicians are exacerbated by the fact that they deal with patient death on a regular basis.

"It boils down to how pet owners verbally – or physically – abuse us," said Evonne Yong, head veterinary technician at The Animal Clinic.

Temasek Polytechnic (TP) lecturer Quah Xin Jie noted that the

expectations of pet owners in a vet clinic are "very different from what they would expect if they were to go into a human clinic".

As medical bills for pets are not subsidised, pet owners typically pay out of pocket for vet services. Bills can run into the hundreds or thousands of dollars.

As a result, pet owners "demand a higher quality of service", said Dr Yong.

"If there's an emergency case that comes in and the vet is dealing with it, we will get a blasting from those with an appointment (who then have to wait)," she added.

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Vet professionals handle chronic, end-stage diseases regularly, said Dr Chow: "We deal with death on an almost daily basis."

The emotional toll results in many vet professionals leaving the industry, contributing to the ongoing manpower shortage, he added: "The turnover rate within the industry is high. It's more of an input-output problem: you are pouring water into the pail, but there are holes in it."

The number of licensed vets in Singapore has multiplied from 121 in 2006 to 542 as of May, said NParks in a release about the council.

But the number of pets has also risen – especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw a spike in pet ownership, said Dr Chow.

While there are no statistics on total pet ownership in Singapore, the number of licensed dogs rose to about 87,000 in 2022, from 70,000 in 2019, based on AVS data.

Vet supply is also constricted because there are no relevant educational pathways at the university

level in Singapore. Yet a university degree is required to obtain a vet licence from AVS.

This means that aspiring vets have to go overseas – typically to the UK or Australia – for their degrees, said Dr Chow, who received his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from the University of Melbourne in 2015.

This can cost about S\$500,000 for a typical six-year programme, including accommodation and living costs, he added.

Aspiring vet Claris Lee, a final-year student in TP's Diploma in Veterinary Technology programme, is keenly aware of the challenges in the industry – not least after an internship at a clinic – but still hopes to pursue further studies in the UK or Australia.

"During my internship, there were always good days and bad days, (and) dealing with pet owners is sometimes really quite frustrating, and it did make me reconsider," she said.

"But for me, the goal at the end of the day is to make sure that their pet is feeling better."

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ASEAN BUSINESS

Wastewater treatment startup Hydroleap seeks Asia-Pacific expansion

By Elisa Valenta
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FRESH from raising US\$4.4 million in its latest funding round, Singapore-based wastewater-treatment startup Hydroleap wants to grow its footprint in the Asia-Pacific, and has Indonesia, Japan and Australia on its radar.

Since its founding seven years ago, the company has raised US\$7.7 million from various institutional investors, including Enterprise Singapore's investment arm Seeds Capital, SGInnovate and the Wavemaker Group.

More strategic investors will be announced soon, said the startup's founder and chief executive, Mohammad Sherafatmand.

In a recent interview with *The Business Times*, he spoke of the many promising opportunities in Indonesia's water-management market, and disclosed the company's plan for a new entity there in 2024.

He is aiming to grow Hydroleap's market share in South-east Asia's largest economy to as much as 30 per cent in three years.

The Iranian-born Sherafatmand, who earned his PhD in environmental engineering from the National University of Singapore, cited Indonesia's booming data-centre sector as the chief reason for his bullishness.

Hydroleap wants to help these resource-intensive data centres in Indonesia manage and recycle their wastewater, which is highly polluted, and treated with chemicals.

As is the case elsewhere, Indonesia's data centres require large amounts of water and electricity to operate around the clock.

The servers, storage facilities and cooling equipment account for the lion's share; cooling alone accounts for up to 40 per cent of a typical data centre's energy consumption.

Sherafatmand pointed out that Hydroleap is committed to wastewater treatment that is both chemical-free and cost-effective, as the company uses sustainable, scalable methods to purify water.

"Chemically intensive processes generate toxic sludge and cause secondary pollution in wastewater. This prevents companies from reusing their industrial water and forces them to rely on fresh water supplies," he said.

He added that Hydroleap makes use of electrochemical techniques to treat industrial wastewater, which can reduce pollutants by up to 95 per cent.

"Data centres can either use traditional air conditioning to cool the servers, which is expensive, or use water for evaporative cooling. The latter is cheaper, but also requires millions of gallons of water," he said.

Hydroleap's funding in July was a Series A round led by Japanese venture firm Real Tech Holdings. Sherafatmand said the plan is to invest about 20 per cent of these funds to beef up the company's research and development teams and operations in Singapore and Australia.

The company's customers in-



Hydroleap founder and CEO Mohammad Sherafatmand says the company is committed to wastewater treatment that is chemical-free and cost effective. PHOTO: HYDROLEAP

clude Singapore's national water agency PUB, real estate group CapitaLand, and Philippine food and beverage company Universal Robina.

In Australia, Hydroleap aims to help data centres and mining industries to manage and recycle wastewater, and will do so with the support of Victoria state's investment attraction agency.

On the whole, Sherafatmand said interest in the company's solutions has grown "significantly" amid rising demand for quality water management, at a time when many parts of the world still lacks access to clean water.

According to data from the

Gates Foundation in the US, the lack of proper sanitation – including proper wastewater treatment – costs an estimated US\$223 billion around the world each year. Studies by the foundation have found that every dollar spent on sanitation can, on average, yield a return of at least US\$5.

"We want to increase our presence in the market, but the reality is that the market is much bigger than what we can do alone," said Sherafatmand.

"That's why we are also open to working with other wastewater-treatment companies that see value in what we do and the solutions we bring."

Local businesses honoured at Singapore Prestige Brand Award

By Renald Yeo
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TWENTY-NINE local businesses ranging from heritage names to regional players were recognised at the 21st Singapore Prestige Brand Award (SPBA) ceremony on Wednesday (Oct 25) evening.

In the Promising Brands category, for example, healthcare provider StarMed Specialist Centre was named the overall winner. The category is for businesses that have been established for between three and eight years.

There were eight other winners in the category, including construction company Craftwork and co-living operator Coliwoo.

Speaking at the awards ceremony held at the Ritz-Carlton hotel, Minister for Trade and Industry and guest of honour Gan Kim Yong noted that businesses and consumers now have a wider range of options in the growing digital economy.

Companies must therefore maintain and strengthen their brands – go beyond branding and marketing initiatives and improve the products and services underpinning the brand, he said.

"In particular, (the government) will work with companies to leverage emerging trends, such as digitalisation and generative artificial intelligence, to enhance their business proposition," he added.

Jointly organised by the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (Asme) and Lianhe Zaobao, SPBA recognises businesses that have distinguished themselves in the competitive business landscape through their branding.

Since the award's inception in

2002, more than 500 businesses have been feted for their accomplishments in this area.

In the Established Brands category for brands that have been in business more than five years, self-storage company Work+Store took home the overall award.

Four Star Mattress, which was established 55 years ago, bagged the top honours in the Heritage Brands category.

This category is for brands that have been on the scene for more than 25 years.

The Regional Brands category was won by skincare company DR's Secret.

This category is for brands that have been established for at least three years, and have had a presence in at least three foreign markets.

The by-invitation-only Special Merit award, which honours public agencies and not-for-profit organisations for their branding efforts, was presented to suicide-prevention agency, Samaritans of Singapore.

Asme president Kurt Wee said: "This year, we are heartened to see brands going beyond traditional branding paradigms by embracing experiential branding, forging immersive connections with their audience."

Despite the high-inflation business landscape, it is encouraging that local businesses see the importance of branding in a digital era, said Lianhe Zaobao executive editor Han Yong May.

"We trust that the winners will serve as inspiration, motivating fellow homegrown enterprises to invest further in their branding strategies," she added.