Did Mark Cushing have a crystal ball? The pandemic has only accelerated what Cushing says he knew was coming and wrote about in his book *Pet Nation: The Love Affair That Changed America*.

Cushing is the founding partner and CEO of the Animal Policy Group, and his involvement in many veterinary initiatives over the years has led to a cutting-edge change, most recently creating the Veterinary Telemedicine Association. Cushing is an attorney who has since 2004 advocated for veterinarians and industry.

Cushing warned about the looming shortage of veterinarians and veterinary technicians/nurses. This is a prediction which many in the industry are greatly aware of. His third projection in the book warns of a shortage of pets. That one would have been a bit harder of a sell, though the pandemic has illustrated that it’s really happening.

Cushing says he’s absolutely certain that demand for pets will continue to soar. “If I need to prove the point, even during the pandemic, look what happened with adoptions. We need about two million (dogs and cats) a year to meet demand. Where are they to come from?”

In some cities—at least at the height of the pandemic—shelters nearly emptied. True enough many shelters (particularly in rural America and the South) continue to have lots of dogs and cats, but some urban shelters have fewer options for adoption than ever, except dogs that look like pit bulls or Chihuahuas. There’s nothing wrong with those choices—but not everyone wants that. Cats are still available but happily fewer. Though, for now, certainly, websites like Petfinder.com still have lots of choices. But the trend is clear.

Shelters with fewer pets “import” them from across state lines. But eventually—due, in part, to successful spay/neuter campaigns—as hard as it is to believe—that steady flow will dry up. It may not be happening tomorrow—but it’s happening.

So, increasingly, pets—particularly dogs—are being rescued from overseas. Cushing says that according to the Centers for Disease Control currently that number was at 1.1 million in 2019, and only about three percent have an appropriate and verified medical exam before landing in the U.S. “It’s great for the individual dogs to be rescued, but there’s a risk of bringing disease with them,” he says.

To Cushing’s point, that’s how the H3N2 strain of canine influenza virus arrived in the U.S. in 2015, and because the virus was novel here, it spread quickly. And many of the dogs that arrive are doing so illegally.

Meanwhile, if you want a so-called designer breed from a responsible hobby breeder, that can mean over a two year wait for a Yorkipoo or Labradoodle. Who can blame families for not wanting to wait when little Johnny and Jill are begging for a dog? No wonder people go online and have flocked to pet stores. Cushing says, “Those (pet store) dogs are from large scale breeders, not always puppy mills.”

No matter, the number of pet stores actually selling dogs/cats is on the decline for many reasons, including increased legislation which prohibits them for doing so (more on that in my next column). Over 300 cities, at least a dozen counties and three states have banned the retail sales of dogs and cats (and in some places also rabbits). If it wasn’t for the pandemic, it’s likely other states would have followed with their own state-wide bans by, and it’s likely in 2021 New York and New Jersey will pass similar laws as Maine, Maryland and California have enacted.

If you desire a pure-bred English Setter or Golden Retriever—there may be a long wait, in part, because responsible hobby
breeders are on the decline and the same is true for those who breed pedigreed cats. And when supply goes down and demand goes up so does the price tag for many dogs.

The answer? Cushing says its breeder certification. “We need to bring everyone to the table, the animal rights and animal welfare groups, hobby breeders, shelters and rescues and the pet store industry,” he says. “We need to certify breeders, and get the departments of agriculture (which currently inspect kennels) out of the picture, and bring in the 76 Land Grant universities, which study breeding, and also even animal shelters to inspect. There is a path forward which requires transparency and at least some trust.”

In any case, while the number of owned dogs and cats is on the rise, and anecdotally so are veterinary visits—at least in some places—however, there is a clear shortage of veterinary professionals.

Cushing says among veterinarians there are up to 5,000 jobs remaining unfilled. “The shortage is more apparent as a result of the pandemic, and it’s painful,” he says. “More demands and no more people to meet it means an increase of burnout and mental health problems, both already an issue before the pandemic.”

Regarding technicians, their pay is simply too low and they continue to be underutilized. “It’s like having a great passer on your team but you only allow the player to run with the ball,” he says. “No wonder, on average, they leave the profession after five years.”

The profession literally can’t afford to keep at the pace it is, with a shortage of veterinarians and with technicians and nurses walking a high–wire daily, ready to free fall on a day-to-day basis.

But there’s good news, some of which was fast-forwarded by the pandemic. Cushing says 17 states simultaneously removed their requirement for Veterinary Client Patient Relationship (VCPR), and telehealth usage skyrocketed. “This has been great for the profession and for pets, and so far, zero harm,” he says.

Here, answering client questions regarding house-training or why is my cat waking me at 4 a.m. can be a source of extra income for technicians, and allow them to shine as the stars they are. And veterinary visits can actually be driven via telehealth. In fact, this is all happening.

As for utilization of technicians, Cushing sees their role evolving. There is no equivalent of a PA (Physician assistant) in animal health but that could change. He adds, “That antiquated notion of ‘If I let a tech do it, why will they need me?’ is disappearing—there’s no time for that nonsense. And when you give qualified techs the opportunity, of course they overdeliver.”

Also, there will be more veterinary schools, or at least one more—for starters in 2021 with Texas Tech at Amarillo, TX.

Problems are impossible to solve without acknowledgement that there is a problem. “Most important, everyone now agrees there really is that (veterinary) shortage,” Cushing says. He predicts vet schools will also slightly adjust class size. And long-term there are various concerted efforts to attract minorities into the profession.

Cushing agrees that 2020 was a year which veterinary medicine began to adjust course.