

CREATIVE DISRUPTION

From Puppy Breath to Gray Muzzles

Longer pet lifespans are transforming case mix, client expectations, and the business of veterinary medicine.

BY BOB LESTER, DVM

Once upon a time, general practitioners spent a good portion of their days caring for puppies and kittens. The story included a lot of client education, nutrition counseling, vaccinations, parasite control, and spays and neuters. We didn't see many geriatric pets because pets simply didn't live that long. Feline leukemia, FIV, parvovirus, and heartworm disease ended far too many lives early.

Today, the story has evolved. Shelters and nonprofit organizations now provide much of the puppy and kitten care and education, and they do it well. Puppy and kitten numbers are temporarily down — the COVID hangover is real — and pets are living much longer.

Better preventive care, improved nutrition, and a strong human-animal bond have reshaped our patient population to include fewer young pets and more older ones. AAHA's "2023 Senior Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats" report that senior canines and felines represent 44% of the pet population. This is not a blip. It's a durable, accelerating trend, and it's one we should celebrate and prepare for.

Depending on the dataset, the average canine lifespan has increased over the past two decades from about 10 years to 13 years. Cats experienced similar gains.

Why Pets Are Living Longer

Several forces are working together:

- Stronger human-animal bond
- Better nutrition across life stages
- Preventive care and wellness visits
- New medications and procedures
- Improved dental care
- Earlier diagnostics
- Better chronic disease management



- A shift toward smaller breeds with longer lifespans
- Improved population control
- Indoor lifestyles that reduce trauma and infectious disease

And we're still early in the story. The ending has yet to be written. The biological potential for longer pet lifespans remains largely untapped. Anti-aging therapies are currently moving through regulatory pipelines. The next decade will certainly bring pets that live even longer and healthier.

From Pediatrician to Geriatrician

What does longevity mean for our profession? Looking at human medicine offers a useful preview. About 17% of the U.S. population is over age 65, yet this group accounts for more than one-third of total health care spending. Among Medicare patients, up to 25% to 30% of spending occurs in the last year of life. Family physicians report that nearly half of their patients are over 65. Buckle up: Veterinary medicine is heading in the same direction, and that's a good thing for veterinary professionals and the pets we care for.

The Implications

As our patients get older, how might visits, medicine, economics, the workforce, and clients be impacted?

1 Visits

Longevity increases lifetime visits per pet. Care shifts from episodic, problem-driven medical encounters to frequent, planned, long-term relationships. Older pets visit more often. Appointments get longer. Problems multiply. Practitioners will see more:

- Rechecks
- Monitoring
- Chronic disease management
- Quality-of-life discussions
- Pain and mobility visits

Our focus will depend on each patient's life stage:

- ▶ **Adult:** Preventive care and early diagnostics
- ▶ **Senior:** Labs, imaging, medication management
- ▶ **Geriatric:** Pain, mobility, renal and cardiac disease, cognitive dysfunction

2 Medicine

We continue the progression from preventive to predictive to palliative care. Senior medicine becomes a core competency. Cases become more complex, and appointments lengthen.

Practices adapt with:

- ▶ Team-led chronic care management
- ▶ Senior wellness plans
- ▶ Hospice and palliative consultations
- ▶ Arthritis and mobility clinics

3 Economics

Longevity might be the most significant demand-shaping force in our profession. More years per pet means higher lifetime spend. Chronic care brings predictable, recurring revenue.

At the same time:

- ▶ Longer appointments pressure margins.
- ▶ Visit capacity becomes a growth constraint.
- ▶ Price sensitivity can rise during prolonged disease courses.

Wellness plans and pet insurance gain importance. Longevity strengthens the investment case for veterinary medicine, but only if practices adapt.

4 Workforce

Chronic care can be emotionally heavier. Conversations are longer and more complex. Client anxiety rises.

Mitigation strategies matter:

- ▶ Empower the team, including veterinary technicians.
- ▶ Employ chronic care coordinators.
- ▶ Provide communication training, and set expectations.



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- ▶ Create practice protocols that align all team members on senior and geriatric care.

5 Clients

Client expectations grow, and affordability concerns surface. Trust, connection, and clear communication become even more critical. Pet owners enjoy more years with their companions, and they look to us to guide them medically, emotionally, and financially. The connection between pets, clients, and the veterinary team strengthens.

Separating Senior from Geriatric

Distinguishing between senior care and geriatric care is important. For expert insights, I refer you to the “2023 AAHA Senior Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats.” Here’s a superficial CliffsNotes version:

- ▶ **Our senior patients are aging but stable.** Their senior status is based on age and breed. The pet might look and act normal. Chronic disease might be absent or in an early stage. The goal for providers is to stay ahead of problems through early detection, risk identification, and life extension through prevention.
- ▶ **Geriatric patients are aging with some functional decline.** Their geriatric status is determined by their health status, not age alone. The pet likely has one or more chronic, progressive, or life-threatening conditions with a noticeable impact on daily function. Our goal as caregivers is to support quality of life, comfort, and decision-making.

Happily Ever After

Teenage pets are becoming the norm in today's practices, reshaping veterinary medicine clinically and economically. Practices that build strong senior and geriatric programs, educate their associates, delegate care across the team, and guide clients thoughtfully will thrive. Practices that simply work harder will struggle.

For today's veterinary school graduates, the future will look nothing like the profession they're entering today. Picture an older patient base combined with wearables/continuous monitoring, artificial intelligence, home diagnostics, computer vision, new therapies, team-based care, antiaging drugs, virtual modalities, and yes, even robots.

The result? More pets are living longer, healthier lives, and more pet owners are enjoying more years of love and connection with their pets.

Pets, families, and our profession all win. And I, for one, look forward to caring for more gray muzzles and silver kitties. As in all good once-upon-a-time stories, the ending is clear: happily — and longer — ever after. **TVB**