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Face of local greeting card line battles cancer

Golden retriever part of OSU clinical drug trial

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Madalyn Ruggiero is with her golden retrievers, Denali, left, and Sir Wilbur. Denali was diagnosed with nasal cancer last fall. *THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH*

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The first in a weekly series of stories exploring the lengths to which pet owners go to help their pets suffering from terminal and chronic illnesses. Medical advances have given pet owners alternatives to euthanizing their companion animals.

According to the Morris Animal Foundation, one in four dogs dies of cancer. Madalyn Ruggiero is hoping her dog isn't one of them.

The Maumee resident is trying to save her beloved golden retriever, Denali, who was diagnosed with nasal cancer last fall.

The sweet 11-year-old dog, who is the subject of a line of greeting cards created by Ms. Ruggiero, clearly doesn't know he is sick. He bounces around Ms. Ruggiero's home, playing with Ms. Ruggiero's other Golden, Sir Wilbur.

Denali has his own Facebook page with more than 27,000 fans worldwide. Ms. Ruggiero says visitors to the page often comment on how happy he and Sir Wilbur seem.

"Tons of people are shocked to see how happy he is, even though he's sick with cancer," she said. "Everyone loves seeing the smiles of pure joy on both of my boys' faces."

Ms. Ruggiero realized something was wrong with Denali when he started having nosebleeds that wouldn't stop.

"When Denali was diagnosed with cancer, I sat and cried," she said. "Then I shook it off, realizing it was not helping me or him. So I am doing something about it."

Nasal tumors comprise about 1 percent of canine tumors and carcinomas are diagnosed in 60 to 70 percent of cases, according to The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Radiation therapy is the only treatment that has resulted in improved survival times. Reported survival times average 10-14 months following radiation therapy.



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The tumor shrinks as much as it is going to after three months of therapy and in most cases eventually resumes growing.

OSU is one of several vet schools conducting a clinical trial of the drug Palladia to treat nasal tumors. Denali is one of the participants.

"He means the world to me, and if he can help other dogs, that would mean the world to me too," Ms. Ruggiero said.

The Morris Animal Foundation conducted a Canine Cancer Campaign from 2007 to 2012. The awareness and fund-raising initiative aimed to give scientists genetic tools to study cancer, help researchers test treatments and determine ways to prevent cancer, and train new canine-cancer researchers.

Through donations from dog lovers nationwide, the foundation provided more than \$5 million in funds for more than 45 canine-cancer studies during the five-year period. Many of these studies are under way and already-completed studies have helped make inroads toward beating this disease in dogs.

Over the past 10 years, more than one-third of all canine health studies have focused on cancer. OSU is recruiting candidates for seven oncology/radiology trials, including one for cats with feline oral squamous cell carcinoma.

"Less is known in cats, but in dogs, about 50 percent of dogs that live until 10 years of age will develop some form of cancer," said Cheryl London, a veterinarian and associate professor at OSU who is conducting the trial that includes Denali. "In dogs, lymphoma is the most common cancer we see, with other tumors such as mast cell cancer and sarcomas common as well."

Clinical trials are very common in veterinary oncology, Dr. London said.

"We perform them in dogs with a variety of cancers," said Dr. London, who has a PhD. from Harvard and attended veterinary school at Tufts University. "Sometimes the studies are aimed at also advancing human oncology research. Sometimes they are specifically designed for dogs."

In the case of Denali, the drug is not new, but is being tested in a new setting, she said.

"Palladia was approved in 2009 for use in treating mast cell cancer in dogs, and we are now testing it in combination with both chemotherapy and radiation therapy to see if we can improve outcomes," Dr. London said.

Regular veterinary visits are essential for early detection of cancer, said Dr. Gary Thompson, a veterinarian at West Suburban Animal Hospital, 3265 King Rd. in Sylvania Township.

"One of the best ways as a veterinarian to be able to know what is not normal is to have a longstanding relationship with a pet, so that 'abnormal' is more easily determined," Dr. Thompson said.

Treating cancer in dogs is much different than treating cancer in people, he said.

"If we can cure the disease, we try," he said. "However, in many cases, the goal is for the best quality of life for the longest period of time, and many of the newer treatment modalities can lead to significant improvements in survival times with minimal impact on quality of life."

The most important thing a pet owner facing a diagnosis of cancer can do is be informed, Dr. London said. In general, a medical oncologist has the most up-to-date information about available therapies, determining the prognosis and other aspects of treatment.

"So they should make every effort to either directly have their dog or cat evaluated by an oncologist, or ensure that their veterinarian has consulted with an oncologist," Dr. London said. "We offer a free consulting service at OSU and are happy to review cases with veterinarians in private practice. This also helps to inform those veterinarians about what clinical trial options may be available for their patients."

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