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Dog-cancer studies could benefit us all

PEOPLE AND PETS | Owners opting for surgery, chemo -- research may aid treatments for animals, humans too

May 15, 2007

 BY JIM RITTER Health Reporter jritter@suntimes.com

When Kristi Best learned her pet dog, Mo, had cancer, she decided to treat the white boxer instead of putting him to sleep.

Arboretum View Animal Hospital in Downers Grove removed seven skin tumors from Mo and prescribed chemotherapy. Best gave Mo two chemo pills a day for two years.

» Click to enlarge image



Kristi Best with her dog Mo who underwent surgery for tumors on his skin.

(Rich Hein/Sun-Times)

COMMON DOG CANCERS

Bernese mountain dog -- soft tissues

Boxer -- brain, lymphoma (lymph nodes)

Cocker spaniel -- lymphoma

Golden retriever, Labrador retriever -- lymphoma, blood

"His quality of life has been great," Best said. "He goes to dog parks, he goes for walks."

Cancer is the leading cause of disease-related death in dogs over age 2. Fifty percent of dogs over age 10 will be diagnosed with cancer.

U. of I. studies dog cancer

Improved treatments are prompting some owners to consider getting their dogs the same types of cancer treatments that humans receive, mainly surgery, chemotherapy and radiation.

And the Denver-based Morris Animal Foundation recently launched a \$30 million fund-raising campaign to fund dog-cancer research at leading centers such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The foundation already has begun funding two U. of I. studies on new treatments for bone cancer. The


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English springer spaniel -- breast

Pug -- skin

Shar-pei -- skin

Greyhound, Rottweiler or any large breed -- bone

Collie -- nasal cancer

Scottish terrier -- bladder, skin/mouth

Chow chow -- stomach

Flat-coated retriever -- bladder, skin/mouth

Source: Morris Animal Foundation

diagnosed at a more advanced stage.

The cost of treating dog cancer varies widely, depending on the breed, type of cancer and other factors. The bill can be as little as \$300 for a simple surgery or as much as \$10,000 for multiple therapies. Larger breeds, which require bigger doses of drugs, typically are more expensive.

Many owners can't afford the cost. But as the bonds between owners and their dogs become stronger, more owners are willing to pursue treatments, Fan said.

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results of such studies potentially could apply to people, said U. of I. veterinary oncologist Timothy Fan.

Cancer treatments typically are tested on animals before they're tried on people. And dogs offer several advantages over lab rats and mice. Because of their larger sizes, for example, dogs have metabolisms that are more similar to human metabolisms.

\$10,000 for treatment?

Many owners don't want their dogs to suffer the side effects of chemotherapy and other treatments. To minimize such suffering, a vet might provide less aggressive treatments intended to extend the dog's life but not cure the cancer.

And dog cancer can be more difficult to treat. There are no cancer screening tests for dogs, and dogs don't complain about symptoms. Consequently, dog cancer typically is

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