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Early detection is key



Early detection protected Robin's life, a favor that the Golden Retriever's owner hopes he will return countless times when he resumes his duties as a police dog.

When Officer Mary MacQueen (pictured at left with Robin) noticed a pink, thick spot on Robin's lower lip, she knew that it was likely cancer. "With Goldens, it's not a question of if they get cancer, it's a matter of when they will get cancer," she said, drawing from her experiences of more than 30 years as a breeder. After conferring with her veterinarian, MacQueen, a decorated police officer from Salamanca, N.Y., brought Robin to the Cornell University Hospital for Animals (CUHA) for treatment. At Cornell, MacQueen's partner was diagnosed with cutaneous epitheliotropic lymphoma, a fairly aggressive and rare skin cancer that is not usually detected until it has metastasized.

"Officer MacQueen's quick detection was a key factor in our success," said Dr. Margaret McEntee, professor of oncology and section chief for oncology at CUHA. "Once cancer has spread to other parts of the body, the future is less than bright."

Seen in only 3 to 8 percent of all canine lymphoma cases, the early stages present symptoms similar to inflammatory skin disease, according to McEntee, who adds that advanced stages typically have more skin lesions on the oral, nasal and eye areas. In addition, McEntee noted that when compared to other types of lymphoma, this type affects the skin first but can metastasize to lymph nodes and other organs.

Robin's treatment began with the removal of his right lymph node and aspiration of his left to check for metastasis. This was followed with 15 radiation treatments on the lower jaw and regional lymph nodes, with oral pain medicine and nerve blocks prescribed to make him more comfortable. "They tried to stay away from his upper jaw as much as possible, so as not to affect his scenting ability," said MacQueen. "Robin's career should be long. Physically, he's a strong dog. Most police dogs have to give up because structurally, their joints begin to fail. This shouldn't happen with Robin as his genes are strong. Goldens are made for this type of work. They've been bred to hunt. Birds, of course, are what most Goldens are asked to hunt, but they can easily be trained to search for anything."

Robin specializes in mantrailing, evidence search, narcotics and human remains detection. He is responsible for keeping many thousands of dollars' worth of illegal drugs off the streets, according to MacQueen. In addition, he is a show champion, and earned the 2009 American Kennel Club's coveted Award for Canine Excellence in Law Enforcement.

"Without training, Robin could have been the dog with ADHD," said MacQueen, who is also a professional dog trainer. "Instead, he is a successful police dog who has and will continue to save lives."

