

For Immediate Release
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CVMA Names Pet of the Year
for contributions to human and animal medicine

The Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) presented its first annual Pet of the Year award to “Jake” Ludwikow, a 15-year-old Rottweiler-Labrador Retriever cross whose own battle with melanoma has helped spur the development of significant new vaccines to treat this aggressive cancer in both dogs and people.

In a moving acceptance speech at CVMA’s Awards Banquet on February 2nd at the Mohegan Sun Casino, his owner, Ms. Kristen Ludwikow, called Jake the “Pet of My Life,” and said that through Jake’s contribution in the study, they had received a “priceless gift.” “We have been allowed to help others in need. What better testament to the human-companion animal bond than that?”

“We are honored that OUR bond had been instrumental in helping to create a solution to a terrible disease,” she said, adding “We are grateful for the great gift of time they received in return for our participation. That is, time together.”

Because melanomas spread quickly even after surgery, the median survival time for dogs with this type of cancer is 60-90 days using traditional treatments, such as the surgical removal of the primary cancer, radiation therapy, chemotherapy and biological therapy, according to an overview of the study on The Animal Medical Center’s website. Jake has survived over 4 years since his diagnosis, and initial data shows a median survival time of 389 days for dogs in the study. The initial results were so positive, in fact, that human trials are now being conducted.

According to Jake’s veterinarian, Arnold L. Goldman, DVM, of the Canton Animal Hospital, Jake developed a malignant melanoma on his toe in October, 2000. After the initial diagnosis, Dr. Goldman performed surgery to amputate the affected toe, and then referred him to Philip Bergman, DVM, MS, PhD, Head of the Donaldson-Atwood Cancer Clinic and the Flaherty Comparative Oncology Laboratory at the Animal Medical Center (AMC) in New York City, for inclusion in a clinical trial to study the effect of an experimental vaccine in the reoccurrence of malignant melanoma. The study uses DNA from another species (in this case human DNA) to spur a dog’s immune system into fighting the cancer. Over 100 dogs have received various DNA vaccines for their melanoma as a result of the study. AMC expects to start a USDA licensure study soon in an attempt to obtain a license for commercial use of the DNA vaccine by veterinarians.

Dr. Bergman presented the award to Ms. Ludwikow and Jake. He has said that Jake's contribution to the program "can not be overestimated."

In a letter to Dr. Goldman about the award, he noted, "Jake has been instrumental in many ways. He has shown us what the immune system is capable of, but more importantly, his blood has helped us to develop the appropriate serum tests to find out if a proper immune response has taken place".

Dr. Bergman credited Dr. Allan Houghton of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center with the idea for developing a xenogeneic DNA vaccine (i.e., the DNA of another species) "to break tolerance, since the vast majority of time when a cancer occurs, it does so spontaneously and therefore the organism is 'tolerant' to it."

A partnership between Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and the Animal Medical Center resulted, and the initial findings of the DNA canine melanoma vaccine study led more rapidly than is usual into human trials of a melanoma vaccine. The human study uses DNA from dogs, that contains the enzyme "tyrosinase," which exists in the melanoma cells. The human study uses canine tyrosinase, while the dogs in the study are administered human tyrosinase.

According to Dr. Bergman, "The data generated in dogs were instrumental in showing the FDA a great safety and efficacy record, which allowed it to move into humans much more quickly than normal. Our abilities to help pets and their owners while also helping humans afflicted with the scourge of cancer is one of the best win-win situations I can think of."

Ms. Ludwikow, who now works for Dr. Goldman as a veterinary technician and office manager, said "I could have never imagined how much Jake would become a path to my life, love and now career."

Dr. Goldman, who nominated Jake for the award, says his contribution to society exemplifies the affection, loyalty, security and value embodied in the human-companion animal bond."

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