



## Pets as patients: Stem cell use on rise, including in Rockford

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Gunther is being treated for fibrous hamstrings with surgery and a stem cell transplant Tuesday, Aug. 9, 2011, at Hillcrest Animal Hospital in Rockford.



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ROCKFORD — At the end of the second part of a morning-long surgery Tuesday, Rockford veterinarian Charles Wimmer fully extended the hind legs of his patient, a German shepherd named Gunther, to test their flexibility.

Gunther's owner, Kari Kobus, was amazed.

"That's the most his leg has been able to extend for months," she said.

The immediate flexibility is thanks to Wimmer's snipping out scar tissue from Gunther's gracilis muscles, which help move his legs and bend his knees.

The veterinarians hope a long-term treatment will come from using stem cells to cure Gunther's condition, fibrotic myopathy. The stem cell treatment is a relatively new procedure, but it's one of the latest developments in the nearly \$51 billion U.S. pet care industry that continues to grow despite the poor economy. In the last decade, pet spending has grown 78 percent, according to the American Pet Products Association, with about \$14 billion spent each year on veterinarian care.

"I always said people will spend their last dollar on their pets," Wimmer said.

### More than a pet

Gunther isn't just a pet — he's part of Search & Rescue Dogs of Illinois, which help emergency personnel search for missing people. The 8-year-old has been trained since birth to follow the scent of human beings, which is an invaluable aid to police searching a field, for example, for a lost child.

Kobus, who's also a veterinarian, said the fibrotic myopathy isn't painful for Gunther, but his limp has sidelined him from the rescue game indefinitely. That leaves Kobus with few options other than the stem cell treatment.

"You can't take a working dog out of the field," she said. "They don't retire well. We need him for the group. He's half of our operational dogs."

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Just half a teaspoon of fluid contains tens of millions of Gunther's stem cells, which make up the internal repair system of every living being. The cells hold yet-to-be-tapped potential to cure a range of diseases in humans and animals alike. The hope is that Gunther's stem cell injection will cure his fibrotic myopathy, an acquired condition that causes a lack of nerve sensation and a pronounced limp in his rear legs.

Left to their own devices, the muscles would have been covered in scar tissue again within weeks.

Although Kobus refers to herself as Gunther's handler, she was a full-on pet mommy Tuesday. She kept finding reasons to pop in on Wimmer during the procedure, and watched worriedly as he cut damaged tissue from Gunther's back legs.

"My poor baby," she murmured.

Gunther was scheduled to go home Tuesday night, but only because his owner is a vet herself. He had a full day planned: a trip to the chiropractor before heading home to Rochelle. Kobus said it could take several months to learn if the stem cell therapy was successful.

**Secret's in the sauce**

Gunther's was the 11th stem cell treatment performed at Hillcrest Animal Hospital, with the 12th scheduled for this morning. Stem cell treatments have been used on animals for several years, but recently the treatment become quicker and more affordable — around \$2,000 nationally, Wimmer said, compared with \$3,000 and up just a few years ago.

Hillcrest uses a system from a Kentucky company, MediVet-America, to harvest stem cells in-house rather than shipping biological products to and from an outside lab. Veterinary technician Denise Doris was in charge of the two-hour process Tuesday.

In a morning surgery, Wimmer sliced 20 grams of fat from Gunther's lateral thorax behind his scapula — in human terms, his left shoulder — and handed it off to Doris. She began the lengthy procedure to turn the fat into stem cells, starting with a fairly grotesque process of chopping the fat with surgical scissors into a chunky slurry.

"This is the worst part," she said, chopping away at the fat. "You can get carpal tunnel doing this."

The science behind MediVet's technique is a mystery to the Hillcrest staff — the procedure is an industry secret — so Doris followed the recipe without knowing the ingredients. After a pinch of Vial A and a drop of Vial G, voila! The fatty pulp was put in a 99-degree bath for several hours, and the stem cells sprang from the broth.

By shortly after 11 a.m., Gunther had only barely shaken off the anesthesia's effects before he went into surgery again. This time, it was to have the scar tissue removed from his back leg muscles and to receive the stem cell injections directly into his hindquarters. One milliliter was split between each leg, with another milliliter being injected intravenously.

Wimmer said most animals get the stem cell treatment to alleviate arthritis, which is a less involved procedure than Gunther's twin operations. But surgery alone is an ineffective way to treat fibrotic myopathy because the scarred tissue always returns.

"The alternative is to do nothing, and that's not going to help him," Wimmer said. "We know surgery alone won't last, so we'll do this."

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