

South Gulf Cove woman stricken with heartworm

By **DANA SANCHEZ - ASSISTANT ENGLEWOOD EDITOR**

SOUTH GULF COVE — A resident in a neighborhood virtually surrounded by mosquito-breeding grounds has been diagnosed with heartworm, a mosquito-borne parasite so rare in humans that just 186 cases are documented in US in the last 20 years, according to a Stanford University study.

In a letter dated Jan. 26, Linda Killinger wrote to Charlotte County commissioners about her diagnosis with heartworm or *Dirofilaria*. She said she is afraid to venture outside her lanai due to the “extraordinary abundance of mosquitoes around my home and neighborhood. Killinger is the unlucky victim of a rare condition that is not a public health concern, according to Dr. Thomas Unnasch, a professor at the University of South Florida’s College of Public Health in Tampa. “The parasite doesn’t survive well in humans,” Unnasch said. “It’s just the wrong kind of host.”

Killinger’s symptoms began as hives in January 2008. She was diagnosed with heartworm 10 months later after a dermatologist opened what appeared to be an abscess on her arm and found a three-inch worm. The heartworm spread to her lung.

“I went through tremendous stress thinking I had lung cancer or breast cancer,” Killinger told the Sun. Stuart James, a concerned South Gulf Cove resident, is on a mission to improve mosquito spraying in the McCall Sand Flats, a state-owned salt marsh that almost surrounds South Gulf Cove and is a prime breeding ground for salt marsh mosquitoes.

The human heartworm case has given added fuel his efforts, he said.

James, a native of Wales, U.K., with a low tolerance for mosquito bites, has been a South Gulf Cove homeowner for eight years. He regularly spends up to six months a year at his home there. He breaks out in golfball-sized welts every time he is bitten by a mosquito.

In South Gulf Cove this year, the mosquitoes, like the rain, came early.

“It’s not as bad as in June and July but there’s a steady stream of mosquitoes,” said Denny Curtis, president of the South Gulf Cove Homeowners Association. “Some are very aggressive. I call them tiger mosquitoes. They pounce on you as soon as you walk outside. Deet doesn’t seem to faze them.”

James wants Charlotte County to revert to its former policy of spraying adult mosquitoes on state-owned lands. That policy was done away with by state mandate decades ago. Long before Killinger came down with human heartworm in Charlotte County, Charlotte mosquito control officer Johnny Hunter was aware of James’s sensitivity to mosquitoes. “I’ve been dealing with Mr. James for three years,” Hunter said. James is essentially asking the Charlotte to overturn state policy but the county does not have the authority to do that, Hunter said.

Decades ago, Charlotte mosquito control programs could spray and kill larval and adult mosquitoes on state lands. Now they can only kill adult mosquitoes on land not owned by the state. They can still spray for larvae everywhere. Shelly Redovan is deputy director of Lee County Mosquito Control District and president of Florida Mosquito Control Association, which educates the mosquito control industry on best practices. Her career in mosquito control spans 25 years. Before working in Lee County, Redovan worked for years in Charlotte County mosquito control as assistant director and biologist. She has been engaged in team mosquito control production efforts between Charlotte and Lee which, she said, share a huge asset that is also a huge liability.

The Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve and its vast areas of wetlands benefit the area’s tourism but contribute to its mosquito problems, she said. “Behind Gulf Cove you have vast areas of mosquito breeding grounds that are undeveloped and always will be,” Redovan said. “State lands have been set aside. So while it’s wonderful for ecotourism, it also produces more mosquitoes than most parts of the world will ever see.” The 12,000-plus acres of salt marsh that virtually surrounds South Gulf Cove represents about half the total 20,000 to 24,000 acres of salt marsh habitat in Charlotte County, Hunter said.

Most dog owners in the Southeastern U.S. are familiar with heartworm and treat their pets for it. The disease can be devastating in dogs — 5-to-6 percent are exposed to the parasite, Unnasch said. Humans also have relatively high exposure — 2-to-3 percent. “But most of the time people don’t get it,” he said. “In terms of odds, it’s probably less likely than getting struck by lightning. This is one of those things that it’s really unfortunate for the person it happened to but it’s such a rare occurrence.”

Dr. James Ogedegbe, epidemiologist and disease control and prevention specialist for the **Charlotte County Health Department**, said Friday that he is unaware of the case.

“It’s not one of the diseases we follow,” he said. “This is not a reportable disease in Florida.”

James, however, is so concerned that he’s considering whether he wants to keep living in Charlotte County.

“I’m concerned for my and my family’s health,” he said. “I have children and grandchildren. They were supposed to visit (from Wales) but we stopped them.”

He’s sent letters to all Charlotte County commissioners and heard back from Robert Skidmore who promised to discuss the issue with Rep. Tom Rooney later this month. “I’m taking his complaints seriously and trying to see if there’s a way to spray on the McCall Salt Marsh,” Skidmore said. James said he has spoken with other residents about the mosquito problem but has been met mostly with complacency. “I think it’s a major issue,” he said. “I wanted to alert the authorities.”

Curtis said he has received several phone calls from concerned residents in South Gulf Cove.

“When you start to hear the same things over and over you get a little concerned,” he said. “Anything where we have humans being affected by mosquitoes is unacceptable. The (homeowners association) is powerless. All we can do is call in to ask for spraying.”

Information on protection against mosquitoes is available at www.charlottecountyfl.com/environmentalservices.

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