

Heaven scent

The charity Medical Detection Dogs provides highly trained canine companions who can sniff out medical emergencies

BY JANE YETTRAM



Henry is a Medical Alert Assistance Dog for Lizzie, who has PoTS

Seven years ago, Lizzie Draper – who lives in West Sussex with her mum, dad and brother – was diagnosed with PoTS, or postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome. “When I’m upright, standing or walking, my heart rate soars, my blood pressure drops and I black out,” she explains. “There’s no warning. I go over like a falling tree. On good days, it happens three or four times. On bad days, it’s 28 or 29.”

Symptoms started when Lizzie, now 27, was 16, and falls have caused cuts, bruises and concussions. “At school, I blacked out constantly, missing lessons. I was so behind, I did an extra year.”

Lizzie got to university. “But, studying animal science, I was in labs a lot – a dangerous place to black out without warning.” She had to give up. “I was stuck at home on the sofa, a prisoner to my body.”

Then one day, Lizzie was watching *The Supervet* on TV. “They were treating an epilepsy alert dog and I thought, could a dog be trained to alert me to my blackouts?”

She started researching – and found the charity Medical Detection Dogs (MDD).

“Our Medical Alert Assistance Dogs can smell when their client is about to become ill,” explains MDD’s Gemma Butlin. “For example, before having a serious hypo, someone with type 1 diabetes will smell different. Trained to detect this odour-change, dogs give a five to ten-minute warning by nudging, pawing, jumping or barking – enough time for their client to take medication or get to safety.”

Canine carers

MDD was set up in 2008, after animal behaviourist Claire Guest, now CEO, was diagnosed with breast cancer – discovered by her dog, Daisy. “Daisy kept nudging Claire in her chest area,” says Gemma. “Medical investigation found a deep-seated tumour. Without Daisy’s early warning, Claire wouldn’t have survived.”

Fifteen years on, MDD has proved that dogs can detect many cancers and other diseases. And, crucially for Lizzie, they train Medical Alert Assistance Dogs.

First, dogs live with a volunteer socialiser, doing basic training. “For 18 months, the dog comes everywhere with me – shops, hospitals, restaurants – learning to settle wherever we are,” says socialiser Marion. “The day my first dog, Ava, left was

Lizzie is in safe paws with labrador Henry, enabling her to finish university and live a full life



heart-breaking, but I knew she’d end up keeping someone safe from injury every day. Now I have my third dog, Kenny.”

Next, dogs are trained by a scent instructor. “Initially, instructors might hide a tennis ball, ask the dog to find it and give them a reward,” says Gemma. “When earmarked for a client, a dog is trained on the specific odour associated with an attack.”

“Meeting labrador Henry was like going on a first date,” laughs Lizzie. “But we bonded immediately. Then, when I had a debilitatingly high heart rate, I’d have to take breath or sweat samples, and friends or family took sweat samples from behind my ear during a blackout.” These were sent to MDD and placed among control samples. “Henry would sniff the samples, doing an alert behaviour on finding mine.”

Instructor Debra Church worked with Henry. “I’ve been doing this for 10 years and when newly placed dogs alert for the first time, it fills me with joy.”

‘Since having Henry, I’ve not needed one ambulance for a blackout or injury’

In five years, Henry hasn’t missed one episode. “He even alerted me when he was with my brother in the garden and I was inside. He insisted on being let in.”

As walking brings repeated episodes, Lizzie uses a wheelchair. “But I’ve been standing on a train platform before, and if Henry hadn’t alerted me, I’d have fallen on to the tracks.” When an alert happens, Lizzie sits or lies down. “I can then be unconscious for several minutes. Henry watches over me until I come round.”

Life-changing companion

Conditions like PoTS are MDD’s priority. “Technology helps some conditions, but not PoTS,” says Gemma. “For our PoTS clients, our dogs are life-changing.”

That’s certainly true for Lizzie. “Since having Henry, I’ve not needed one ambulance for a blackout or blackout-related injury.” Crucially, he’s enabled her to get on with her life. “I went back to uni, finished studying and graduated.” She also goes out with friends without worrying. “Plus, Henry and I are going on our first trip abroad, to Disneyland Paris on Eurotunnel.”

Henry has changed Lizzie’s family’s lives too. “Initially, they had to learn to put their faith in Henry. Now they know I’m in safe paws.” When out with Henry, everybody asks about him. “People think he’s some magical being. And he is – he’s a superdog!”

For more, visit medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk