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Barrie's 'Braveheart' still fighting for ALS

Janis Ramsay, STAFF
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Barrie's Derek Walton is a fighter and he's doing what he can to bring awareness to Lou Gehrig's disease.

Recently, Chicago scientists announced they discovered a potential cause of Lou Gehrig's disease, or Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). In Canada, approximately 3,000 people have the disease.

The latest announcement paves the way for the creation of new drug therapies.

Walton wasn't a part of the research study at Northwestern University, but he's happy to hear about the findings.

"Given the length of time I've had ALS, I no longer qualify for trials," said Walton.

"What I'm excited about is they've identified a new cause for ALS."

Researchers identified a breakdown in the protein-processing system of nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord of people with the disease, according to a study recently published in the journal *Nature*. These neurons are unable to remove damaged proteins, and then they start to pile up, impairing the ability of the cells to repair or maintain themselves.

As motor neurons die, they stop sending messages to muscles.

While intellect is unaffected, the progressive disease slowly robs the body of its ability to walk, speak, swallow and breathe.

Most people with ALS die from respiratory failure, usually within three to five years from the onset of symptoms. But about 10 per cent of patients survive for 10 or more years.

Walton is one of them.

He was diagnosed in 2002 and since then he's been fundraising for the ALS Clinic at

Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and his doctor, Lorne Zinman.

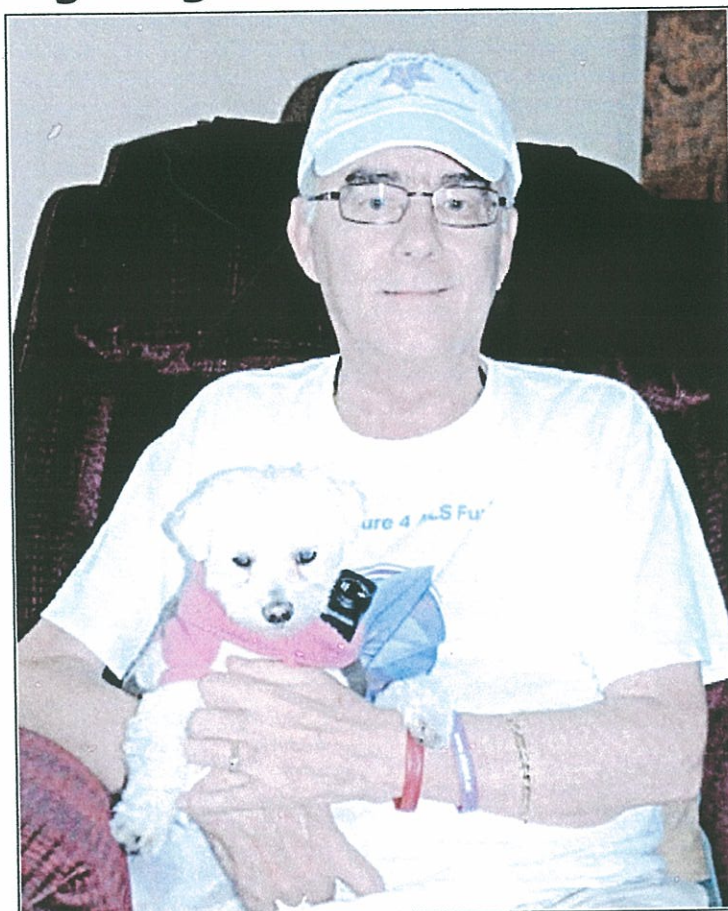
"I started with symptoms as far back as 1998 and spent two or three years trying to find out what the problem was," said Walton.

He knows the latest research study results may not help with his fight against the disease, but said it paves the way to help future patients.

"Finding the cause will allow researchers to zero in on what drugs are necessary to prevent that cause," said Walton.

"The problem with ALS is there's so few of us in Canada, and we lose two patients a week. Any news with ALS is something to get excited about. My symptoms are moving along and this won't be for me, but it will be for the next generation."

Walton said he's noticed his energy levels have dropped over the past three years, and the use of his arms has declined.



Barrie's 'Braveheart' still fighting for ALS. Derek Walton, who has Lou Gehrig's disease, sits with dog Tess at his Barrie home. He's thrilled to hear scientists may have found a cause for the disease. He continues his fight against symptoms and to raise money for the cause. *Janis Ramsay photo*