



www.upstatepoison.org

50 YEARS

Poison Prevention

Newsletter

March 2007

SUNY Upstate Medical University
University Hospital • 750 East Adams Street • Syracuse, NY 13210

Upstate New York Poison Center Celebrates 50 Years of Service to the Community!

Reflections on the History of the Central New York Poison Control Center

*Howard L. Weinberger, MD
Medical Director - 1968 to 1991*

The first recognized Poison Control Center was developed by Dr. Edward Press, a pediatrician in Chicago, IL in 1953. The center in Syracuse was opened in 1957 under the auspices of Dr. Virginia Harris who was the Medical Director of Maternal and Child Health in the City of Syracuse Department of Health (subsequently the Onondaga County Health Department).

Dr. Harris recognized early that a Poison Center needed to be housed in a clinical setting and thus began a collaboration with the Department of Pediatrics at Upstate Medical Center.

Continued on page 3

The Upstate New York Poison Center responds to more than 50,000 calls annually, with 60% of the calls involving children under the age of six. Over 75% of our calls are successfully treated at home through telephone consultation, eliminating unnecessary trips to the Emergency Department. As a component of University Hospital's Department of Emergency Medicine the poison center is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to respond to calls from health care professionals and the general public.

Our Mission Statement

The Upstate New York Poison Center (UPNYPC) assists the medical community and the general public with poison emergencies by providing state of the art management expertise and with poison prevention information to prevent poisonings before they occur. Combining compassionate patient care, with education, research and community outreach, the staff of the UNYPC confirms its commitment to excellence through a dedication to wellness.

Our Purpose

The Upstate New York Poison Center is dedicated to reducing the number, cost, and severity of poisonings within its designated 34 county service area as mandated by New York State Law.

The Staff at the Center

The call center is staffed by registered nurses certified by the American Association of Poison Control Centers as Specialists in Poison Information. Medical and Clinical toxicologists are available for consultation. The staff provides case management and poison information to the public and to health care professionals within our 34 county service area. Additionally, the center maintains a list of other consultants, specialists in their field, to help in the management as necessary.

Professional and Public Education

Education for Health Care Professionals is accomplished through: Case Conference held weekly at the Center; Clinical Rotations for Physicians, Pharmacists, Nurses and other Health Care Professionals; In-services for Hospital Staff throughout the 34 county service area; our Annual Toxicology Teaching Day held in Syracuse, NY each fall; and through our Drug Information Services.

Continued on page 2

Public educational programs for children, parents, seniors and many other segments of the population are customized for the needs of the target audience. Health educators promote poison prevention awareness in local communities and work closely with identified points-of-service agencies to provide educational programming and materials to the communities served by the Center.



Testimonials

If you have never had to call the Poison Center before and are wondering what kind of service you could expect. Here are some testimonials from callers who responded to our survey.

"The line barely rang."

"I was very happy with your service! Keep it up!"

"I called twice in one week. Each time after I stopped stroking my 2 1/2 great-grandson is fine. God bless you all."

"I was very pleased with the service I received. I was also happy to have the extra information that was sent to me."

"Found your service very reassuring and helpful."

"I love this service! My daughter is 19 months and eats a lot of crayons, erasers, etc!"

"The nurse was able to determine dosage taken, immediately, familiar with product and concise info."

"The nurse was very caring, helpful & prompt. I'll definitely call again."

"Karen was a very comforting person to this senior citizen."

"The woman who answered the phone was extremely helpful and reassuring. She put me at ease immediately. Thank you!"

"I am a school nurse - I call frequently - I am always pleased with the service."

"My nurse was excellent, excellent!"

"Very friendly and responsive ... knowledgeable and polite!"

Community Collaboration

A winning combination

The Upstate New York Poison Center works closely with community agencies and health organizations in managing poison exposures.

Safe storage and handling of medicine is critical in preventing unintentional poison exposures. Medications in the purse or pocket present the opportunity for an unintentional exposure. The following case reported by the Poison Center illustrates the importance of the safe storage of medications.

The Upstate New York Poison Center was contacted by a parent who found tablets and an empty prescription bottle on the floor at a local restaurant often frequented by children. The Poison Center contacted the restaurant and was informed that the area where the pills were found was a large, open area where children of all ages often gather. In addition, they stated that over 300 children visited the restaurant that day. The manager of the restaurant was very helpful and had her staff canvass the entire area looking for additional pills. No additional pills were found. The manager also contacted

Under the medical direction of Dr. Paul Wehrle, who was a Pediatric Infectious Disease specialist (but was also very interested in epidemiology and accident prevention) the Center was housed in the Syracuse City Hospital (now Silverman Hall). Dr. Wehrle supervised the primary responders to Poison calls who most often were Pediatric Interns and Residents. In 1958- 1959, that was my first introduction to the Poison Center during my assigned rotation at the City Hospital.

Initially, calls came from the public and records showed that in the first year of operation, 163 calls were answered at the Center. The Center consisted of a desk in an office with several textbooks on Pharmacology and Toxicology. Most of the information about commercial products came from the National Clearinghouse for Poison Control Centers which also maintained a database from reports sent in voluntarily by poison centers across the nation. In the 1960's it was common for many Emergency Departments to self-designate as Poison Control Centers, although the number of centers which had access to the information from the National Clearinghouse was more limited.

When Dr. Wehrle left Syracuse in 1961 for California, the direction of the Center passed to Dr. Alvin Novack who was trained in Pediatrics but was a member of the Department of Preventive Medicine at Upstate. By 1967 (the tenth year of operation of our Poison Control Center), records showed that we received an average of 140 calls per month! Almost 90% of calls came from the city of Syracuse and almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of all calls related to a possible ingestion by children less than 5 years of age.

With the opening of the University Hospital in 1964 and subsequent closing of City Hospital, it made sense to move the Poison Control Center to University Hospital and it was situated in a small (windowless office) in the rear of the Pediatric Emergency Room.

Staffing was still by Pediatric Interns and Residents who, in the process of responding to poison calls, learned a great deal about poison prevention and the management of common poisoning in children (and adults).

The Poison Control Center remained a joint venture of the County Health Department and the Department of Pediatrics for many years and I became the Medical Director in 1968 when Dr. Novack moved to New Haven, Ct. Dr. Harris and I initiated a number of community education efforts to highlight poison prevention. Two major initiatives nationally affected

childhood poisoning in the 60's and 70's – one was the FDA regulation which limited children's aspirin to no more than 36 in a bottle and the second was the introduction of so-called "child-proof" tops for medicines.

In the mid 1970's, there were about 15 poison control centers in New York state – large centers in New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Long Island, while others functioned in name only – basically a phone on the wall in an emergency room of some of the smaller hospitals.

With support from the New York State Health Department, an informal consortium of Medical Directors of the larger Centers began to meet several times a year in Albany. It soon became obvious that some form of designation and certification was necessary to ensure standardized high quality performance of the various centers. Within a short time, most of the smaller centers closed on their own leaving six Centers scattered through the state. By the end of the 1970's our Center was receiving 400 calls per month and our outreach beyond the city of Syracuse was obvious since almost 30% of calls came from outside Onondaga County.

Emma Abel, RN was the first full time Nurse specialist hired to answer calls in the early 1980's and she was followed by a series of other nurses whose role was dedicated fully to the role as the number of calls continued to increase.

In addition to continued support from the Onondaga County Health Department, modest financial support came from the Health Departments of Oswego County at this time and "moral" support from leaders in Cortland and Cayuga Counties, recognizing the effect of outreach by the Center to the greater Central New York region.

With facts in hand, the various medical directors kept up the pressure in Albany documenting the need for formal state support for a state wide poison control center network, which was finally accomplished in.

The Center was officially transferred to the Department of Emergency Medicine in 1992 under the medical direction of Dr. Richard Cantor who has led it to a level of success unimagined in the "olden" days. It is still dedicated to the same goals and principles which Dr. Harris envisioned when the center was first opened – to serve as a resource of information for professionals in the management of poisoning (mainly accidental) and for dissemination of education to the public and to professionals for poison prevention.



Visit us on the Web

www.upstatepoison.org

You can now visit us on the web. The Upstate New York Poison Center's web site is a wealth of information. Get the facts on poison tips, education, and more.

We offer educational opportunities with Train-the-trainer programs designed for teachers, healthcare professionals and childcare providers. You can download our ABC's of teaching poison prevention and begin today! All of our educational materials are in a (pdf) format for easy downloading and reproducing. You can catch up on back issues of our newsletter "Poison Prevention" too! While you are

there take our site survey and let us know how you liked the site. We are always looking for valuable feedback and suggestions for improvement.



Community Collaboration

Continued from page 2

the Syracuse Police Department to report the incident. The Poison Center contacted the police department to determine if they had any additional information. In a continued spirit of cooperation the police informed the Poison Center of the name of the drug listed on the prescription bottle. The Poison Center then contacted the Onondaga County Department of Health and spoke with the Commissioner of Health, who agreed to distribute press releases to the local media alerting them to the situation and encouraging any concerned parents to contact the Poison Center for management recommendations. The Poison Center was in contact with University Hospital's Pediatric Emergency Department apprising them of the situation and alerting them to the potential surge in pediatric visits, due to this incident. The local media responded to the press release by providing this crucial information to the parents. No children, to date, appear to have been impacted by this situation.

This incident could have happened to you or someone you know. Remember, keep all medications in a safe and secure location. Be especially cautious when taking medications with you out into the public. Always have the number of the Poison Center available. The Poison Center is available to take your call 24 hours a day, 1-800-222-1222.