

NEWS

Poison Control Center provides information, saves lives

By RODNEY FOUSHEE
Staff Writer

The phone rings about 3 a.m., and John Holladay rolls off the worn couch on the third floor of the Coker Life Sciences Building. It's Grand Strand General Hospital. They've got an overdose victim.

"Pump the stomach, watch for vital sign changes," Holladay says. "Call me back in 15 minutes."

The female patient has a terrible headache the next day, but she is alive thanks to Holladay and the Palmetto Poison Control Center.

The center, operated from USC's College of Pharmacy, is the only poison control resource in South Carolina, said Dr. Brooks Metts, the center's director. It serves all 46 counties in the state and 13 counties in Georgia.

The center operates a 24-hour toll-free telephone line that provides hospitals and the public with information and treatments concerning exposure to poisonous substances. Many calls are emergencies. The

center has at least one licensed pharmacist on duty at all times, Metts said.

"We handle about 100 calls a day," Metts said. These include both information and actual exposure calls. The center had over 35,000 exposure calls last year. An exposure is defined as contact with a "questionable" substance.

USC pharmacy students help answer phones between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Exposure calls vary from exposure to industrial chemicals, drug overdoses, gasses and fumes, and insect and animal bites to ingestion of medicines, cleaning agents, personal care products and poisonous plants and berries. People come in contact with every imaginable poison, Metts said.

Once an exposure call is logged in, the person's weight, age and kind of substance and amount of exposure are determined from a series of questions and recorded. The person's address is also recorded in case they need to be referred to the nearest hospital, Metts said.

The center has a computer data base, Poisondex, which allows quick access to

more than 1,000 books of information stored on CD-ROM. In seconds, the latest information on any substance from Raid roach spray to U.S. Army chemical weapons is displayed.

Doses, symptoms and complications are shown. Treatments are also advised. The center also has hundreds more books on microfilm as well as an extensive library of hardcover books.

Once treatment is recommended, the center might call the person back every 15 minutes to determine if further action is needed. More than 70 percent of all calls the center handles need no further medical attention, Metts said. But Metts' advice is to "call as soon as any poisoning is suspected," with early treatment being crucial.

The service drastically reduces medical costs in South Carolina and saves lives by preventing unnecessary emergency room visits for minor cases. However, the service encourages medical treatment for serious cases, Metts said. An average emergency room visit will cost at least \$200, he added.

According to Metts, the center receives

more calls from the public than from hospitals. The hospital calls are usually more serious but not always, he said.

Most of the public calls are from mothers whose children have taken medicines, Metts said. Children under the age of five account for more than 60 percent of the accidental poisonings in the United States.

They take too many vitamins, too much cough syrup and other adult medicines that taste good, Metts said. Only three ibuprofen tablets can be a serious danger to a small child.

Children also eat other poisonous materials including household cleaners, houseplants and even cigarette butts. Three or more cigarette butts or a whole cigarette can lead to nicotine poisoning in children, Metts said.

The center also receives calls from adults who are exposed to poisons.

"People accidentally brush their teeth with Preparation-H and rinse their mouth with bleach," Metts said. After answering calls for more than 15 years, Metts has adopted the motto "Why ask why?"

The center receives quite a few exposures to snake and spider bites in the summer as well as jellyfish stings from the beach, Metts said. About 5 percent of the center's calls come from pet owners and veterinarians. Even small doses of human medicines can harm or kill dogs and other small pets, said Holladay, a USC graduate student.

The center also serves as a teaching site for pharmacists such as Holladay and medical interns and pharmacy undergraduates.

Amy Link, a pharmacy senior, has been working for the center for a year and a half. Link and other students gain valuable experience from answering calls. The center has helped broaden her understanding of the need for poison information, Link said.

The center also provides information and programs for poison prevention such as Mr. Yuk stickers, a green scowling face placed on all household chemicals, for children and pamphlets for adults.

The center can be reached at 1-800-922-1117 or in Columbia at 765-7359.

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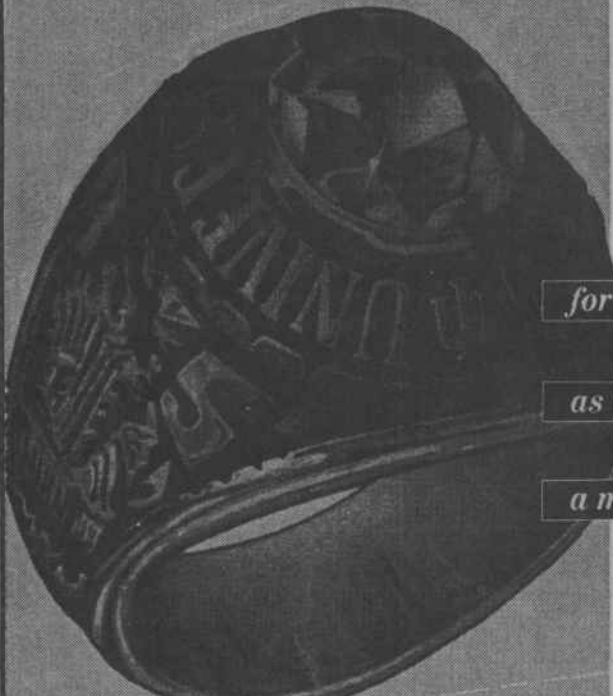
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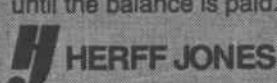
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