

Editor's comment

One man's poison...



A recent issue of the British magazine *New Scientist* carried the following letter, entitled 'Edibly venomous, your article refers to Gila monsters as "poisonous". This is incorrect. Gila monsters are perfectly edible (I know this from personal experience). They are, on the other hand, venomous'.

This may seem like nit-picking, but the distinction is important when discussing toxicity among plants and animals. This issue of *CME* deals in great depth with a number of aspects of poisoning. It could have been a much larger issue, as the Tygerberg Poison Information Centre has an enormous wealth of knowledge and experience to impart, and it was difficult to know what to leave out. Space constrained me to include only topics which I felt would be of the most immediate use to a general practitioner, particularly those of you who are working in isolated areas.

The main articles on the diagnosis and management of poisoning, along with the management of electrolyte and acid-base disturbances, are fundamental to the subject. They are provided in such a way that anyone should be able to deal with the immediate situation and stabilise the patient before contacting the poison's line for further advice. Remembering my time as an isolated GP in rural Canada, this contact is often as much for reassurance that you have done the right thing as for actual advice.



The article on poisoning associated with traditional medicines is particularly pertinent, as many of our population will consult their own traditional healers before seeking more conventional advice. Since many of the plants used are specifically chosen for their 'purgative' properties, the potential for toxicity is relatively high. There is also the problem of the use of antifreeze and even brake fluid and battery acid as part of so-called 'herbal enemas', with all the medical complications that can result from this.

This issue should become a valued reference work for any practitioner, whether urban or rural. The information will not date and is highly practical. Hopefully this will save the authors from many disturbed nights as they deal with calls to the poison's advice line!

The Tygerberg Poison Information Centre can be contacted 24 hours on (021) 931-6129.

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