

# Acute poisoning

In this edition of *CME*, the first two articles cover basic principles of acute poisoning, the emphasis being on early identification of the poison and timely intervention. They are followed by an article on antidotes, supportive agents and other essentials necessary for effective management of acute poisoning. A section on acid-base and electrolyte disturbances — complications often associated with severe poisoning — is also included. As life-threatening acute poisonings often present with severe gastrointestinal symptoms and signs, an article on food poisoning is included for differential diagnostic purposes.

Contributions such as mushroom poisoning, poisoning due to traditional medicines and plant poisoning as well as marine poisonings and envenomings are included, as these entities have not recently been dealt with in *CME*. Snake and spider bites and scorpion stings were covered in the August 2000 edition of *CME*. In this regard, the reader is also referred to a publication entitled *The Diagnosis and Treatment of Envenomation in South Africa*, which may be obtained from the South African Institute for Medical Research (SAIMR).

Contrary to popular belief, acute poisoning is more common in adults than in children, and drug overdose is by far the most common clinical entity. For details on drug overdose, and exposure to other non-drug poisonous chemicals, the reader should consult the 6th edition of the *SA Medicines Formulary*, which will appear in the second half of 2003.



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## TYGERBERG POISON INFORMATION CENTRE

The Tygerberg Poison Information Centre provides a 24-hour service and has been in operation since the mid-1970s. A medical doctor and clinical pharmacist conduct the centre's daily routine activities. The after-hours service is provided by the day staff plus an additional 2 medical doctors. Eight per cent of the centre's calls/consultations emanate from Tygerberg Hospital, and the rest (more than 90%) are from callers outside the hospital. The calls from outside Tygerberg Hospital are broken down as follows: 45% from the greater Cape Town region (mostly other hospitals, clinics, doctors, pharmacists and nurses), 20% from the rest of



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the Western Cape and 35% from other provinces. More than 80% of all calls are from medical or para-medical professionals (doctors, pharmacists, nurses, etc.) and 20% from the lay public. The centre currently processes approximately 5 000 calls/consultations per year.

The centre's primary function is giving advice to professionals (doctors, nurses and medical health care providers) on how to deal with cases of acute exposure to poisonous substances and acute poisonings. Poison centre consultants also deal with issues relating to occupational and environmental toxicological problems. In addition, forensic and medico-legal consultations are a substantial part of the centre's activities.

The poison centre, by providing information on how to deal with toxicological exposures and acute poisonings in a rational and timely manner, helps to limit complications, while at the same time acting as a filter to reduce unnecessary hospital admissions. Its crucial role in primary health care is clear. The 24-hour emergency Tygerberg Poison Information Centre number is (021) 931-6129.

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