

It is generally believed that the first “poison control center” was established, during the 1950s, in Chicago. Although the formal establishment of such a program may have been the first, it is clear that, in New Jersey, efforts at poison prevention were already well in place by that time. Pharmacists in Passaic County had begun efforts at educating the public to the dangers of poisonings and how to prevent them.

By the nineteen sixties, there were hundreds of poison centers, scattered somewhat haphazardly, across the nation. By 1972, there were 32 such centers in New Jersey. Located in acute care hospitals, these centers “advertised” themselves as poison centers in their literature, some even listed their telephone numbers in directories, etc. They were located either in emergency rooms or pharmacies, but had limited resources devoted to them. They were all listed and cooperated with the National Clearinghouse for Poison Prevention, a division of the United States Food and Drug Administration. They received index cards with information about select products. In turn, they were to fill out cards which served to document calls to them about poisonings. By 1982, they were collectively “responding” to approximately 5,000 calls each year.

In the late 1970’s the federal government launched a series of initiatives to develop regionalized programs for emergency care. Among the 11 categories considered was that of “poison control.” In response to this initiative the Commissioner of Health of the State of New Jersey, Joanne Finley, MD, developed a commission to look into all of the subject areas. The subcommittee charged with looking at the issue of poisonings determined that the most appropriate model for the program would be that of one centralized center with a dedicated budget and staff.

In 1982 Assemblyman Harry MacEnroe introduced legislation calling upon the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDH) to establish a drug and poison control program for the state of New Jersey. Signed into law by Governor Thomas Kean in November 1982, The New Jersey Poison Information and Education System (NJPIES), funded by a contract from the NJDH, a small grant from the US Department of Health and Human Services, and a grant from the McNeil Consumer Products Company, began full time operation on February 1, 1983. From the very first day of operation, NJPIES’ information specialists, all nurses, pharmacists or physicians, have responded to inquiries from both the lay public and health professionals. During its first year of operation, the hotline at NJPIES responded to over 35,000 calls for help.

Triaging calls from the public and handling the vast majority of exposures at home has saved countless millions of health care dollars. Additionally, the development of a robust record keeping system has provided data to enable the system to understand the epidemiology of poisonings in the state and to develop appropriate preventive and treatment strategies.

Now completing 25 years of service as the state’s drug and poison information system, the program has added targeted health issues to its charge. When the NJDH looked to establish a hotline for information about the epidemic of AIDS in 1988, it asked NJPIES to administer this program. Subsequent, this program has expanded into the areas of sexually transmitted diseases and hepatitis. When there was evidence that raccoon rabies was about to descend upon the state, NJPIES collaborated with veterinarians and infectious disease specialists in the NJDH and developed a system to work through the hospitals and local health departments of the state to respond to inquiries from the public and health professionals.

It has always been the belief among the staff of NJPIES, that poisoning can not really be controlled. Poisonings can either be prevented or treated. Therefore, NJPIES developed two distinct types of educational programs in addition to handling emergency calls. The first is a public education program to spotlight the issues of prevention and preparedness. The second is that of professional education: providing education on the treatment of poisonings to nurses and nursing students, physicians and medical students, and practicing pharmacists and practicing students.

Although NJPIES has been involved in many high profile cases, it still responds to each inquiry received on its hotlines as equally important.

Today, NJPIES exists as a division of the Department of Preventive Medicine and Community Health (DPMCH) of the New Jersey Medical School (NJMS) of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ). It views its role as being the principle force in the public health approach to poisonings and all things toxic. It is involved in all disaster preparedness and response. Representatives of NJPIES participate in statewide efforts, through the Departments of Health and Senior Services and that of Human Services. Equipped with advanced computer technology, NJPIES tracks calls on both a case based model, as well as, a geographical model. The goal of this tracking is to define a cluster and then determine if a public health “crisis” has occurred. Over the past few years several clusters have been identified and prompted responses. We hope through these efforts we can prevent the spread of the outbreak beyond its original geographical boundaries.

What does the future hold for NJPIES? We plan to develop a plan to increase our educational efforts into each county of the state. Highlighting preventive education for school age children has been very effective and is so sought after that we can not respond to all of the requests. Thus we hope to work with local community groups to provide local educational efforts. We have begun providing programs for senior citizens in hoping to prevent serious drug interactions or poisoning.

Adding a full time epidemiologist has provided us the opportunity to work more closely with local health departments to determine if there may be unique situations inherent to them and to help provide intervention strategies.

The treatment of the poisoned patient has become quite complex. Currently, we have residents in emergency medicine family practice and pediatrics spending some time with us. They experience the day to day operation of the poison center. Because of their limited time with us, they can not be expected to leave with much in the way of an expanded knowledge of treatment modalities. Thus, it is the goal of NJPIES to develop a robust training program in medical toxicology. Working with the appropriate basic science departments at NJMS, NJPIES plans on developing a formal fellowship program which will join basic science with the practice of medical toxicology.