

ASPCA ANIMAL POISON CONTROL CENTER

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Katie McKnight, CVT
(standing), consults with
Terri Dudis, DVM. Visiting are
Dr. Dudis' dogs, Noel and PJ.



Each day, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center (APCC) receives hundreds of calls from pet owners, veterinarians, and veterinary technicians requesting immediate assistance in treating an animal that has been exposed to a potentially hazardous substance. In 2005, the APCC handled more than 100,000 such cases. Although the reasons for the calls make up an inexhaustible list, frequent culprits include human medications, insecticides, rodenticides, fertilizers, plants, and even chocolate.

WHAT IS THE APCC?

The APCC, the only facility of its kind in North America, is dedicated to helping the public and veterinary professionals treat toxicology-related exposures involving animals. The center, which can be reached by calling their hotline at 888-426-4435, is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The staff consists of board-certified veterinary toxicologists, licensed veterinarians, certified veterinary technicians, and veterinary assistants. The operation is funded by charging the caller a case-based consultation fee of \$55. This fee, when combined with donations, enables the nonprofit center to continue to provide 24-hour life-saving animal toxicology advice from veterinary professionals.

The consultation fee is waived, however, for any case involving an agent covered by a manufacturer participating in the ASPCA Animal

Product Safety Service (APSS) program. The APSS provides participating corporations with an animal product safety and adverse event reporting program that supports corporate product stewardship initiatives. As an APSS client, a company is provided with a specially designated toll-free number that can be listed on its product labels and literature; the number is available to the company's customers so that they can receive 24-hour consumer support (e.g., animal toxicology assistance), if needed. APSS clients can also receive case reports and consulting services.

WHAT GOES ON BEHIND THE SCENES?

There are no quick and easy answers to animal toxicology inquiries. Detailed patient and exposure information is required for an appropriate and accurate assessment of any potential toxicologic exposure.

Potential toxicology cases involve various information-gathering techniques and, often, some degree of detective work. The patient's medical history and current status as well as the details surrounding the exposure must be taken into account, including:

- **Type and amount of the agent** that the animal was exposed to
- **Circumstances** surrounding the exposure
- **Time frame** during which the exposure occurred
- **Presence of clinical signs** and when they developed

Basic information about the patient must also be gathered. Because *the dose makes the poison*, it is vital that a patient's weight be obtained. Other necessary information includes the patient's age, sex, reproductive status, species, breed, health history (including any medications the patient has received), information regarding recent surgeries, and the types and degree of clinical signs, if present. Ultimately, the goal is to treat the patient, not the poison; therefore, it is important to review all the circumstances surrounding an exposure while assessing the information based on the patient's individual characteristics.

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▲ Sean D. Gastelum, CVT, prepares for his shift on the hotline.

AnTox, the direct-entry online medical records system unique to the APCC, is the most comprehensive veterinary toxicology medical record system in the world. This integrative system is made up of two primary databases:

- A **medical records database** consisting of more than 850,000 individual cases
- A **medical library database** containing a wealth of information about animals, clinical signs, substances and their effects, and therapies

This powerful system enables the APCC staff to efficiently review

trends in past cases involving similar agent exposures while consulting on a specific case or in the capacity of a biosurveillance-monitoring role. AnTox also provides a wealth of data for research and review of a vast array of animal toxicants, including pesticides, pharmaceuticals, plants, metals, and other agent exposures. Having access to the extensive and expert animal toxicology advice available from the APCC can prove to be an invaluable and possibly even life-saving asset.

The APCC is a member of the American Association of Poison

Control Centers and works closely with human poison control centers in referring human poisoning cases to human centers or assisting with animal poisoning cases received by human centers. Animals do not respond in the same manner as humans do to various toxicants, and there are numerous agents that may present potentially life-threatening problems for animals but do not pose a concern to humans. It is in these instances, especially, that the APCC staff, along with the powerful AnTox resource, may serve as an invaluable information source. Discoveries of and subsequent efforts to increase awareness of the potentially hazardous impact of grape and/or raisin exposures in dogs, lily exposures in cats, and xylitol exposures in dogs are just a few examples of the positive impact the APCC has on the lives of animals and the veterinary community.

WHAT TYPE OF TRAINING DO STAFF MEMBERS RECEIVE?

Extensive toxicology training is provided to new ASPCA APCC veterinary health professionals. Technicians and assistants undergo 3 to 4 weeks of entry-level protocol training. In addition, they must complete 1 to 2 weeks of basic phone skill and software operation training. Phone skill training incorporates learning how to most successfully provide service to stressed callers.

APCC staff members also continually develop their knowledge while on the job. Six levels of protocol training are available for mastery by technicians. A phone feedback committee consisting of volunteer colleagues meets once a month with the purpose of providing continual phone skill development for both technicians and assistants. Technician rounds are held monthly as well. It is extremely beneficial for staff members to share work experiences to nurture continual skill and knowledge development and, ultimately, exemplary customer service.

History of the APCC

The Animal Toxicology Hotline was developed in the autumn of 1978 under the direction of renowned toxicologist Dr. William Buck at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine at Urbana-Champaign. Although the hotline was originally designed for use by Illinois callers, word of its value and existence spread nationally, especially after the phone number was broadcast on the Paul Harvey radio show and printed on the label of a popular rodenticide. In 1980, the name of the hotline was changed to Animal Poison Control Center. The national recognition and scope of use prompted another name change, in 1984, to National Animal Poison Control Center.

The ASPCA acquired the center from the University of Illinois in the summer of 1996. Ties with the College of Veterinary Medicine remain strong: Several APCC staff members hold university appointments, and APCC also provides clinical toxicology training to veterinary toxicology residents. The ASPCA APCC is an Allied Agency of the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine.

Services Available to Veterinary Clinics

The APCC offers the Veterinary Lifeline Partner Program (VLPP), which is designed to specifically meet the needs of veterinary staff members should they need assistance with a toxicology case. Upon enrollment, an account is created for the clinic or practice participant. Pertinent information about the practice is entered into the account so that as soon as a call from a member clinic comes

in, the APCC can instantly identify the clinic. There is no fee for participation in the program; however, a credit card number is kept on file. The credit card is billed only when a call is received in which the expert animal toxicology services provided by the center are requested regarding a non-APSS agent. If the owner provides his or her credit card, the VLPP's credit card on file will not be charged.

VLPP participants

are charged \$50 per case, a \$5 savings. Participants also receive an incident summary for the patient's medical record, newsletters (via email) containing toxicology tips and biosurveillance alerts, the opportunity to receive bulk brochures and magnets for distribution to clients, a subscription to *ASPCA Action*, an ASPCA Veterinary Lifeline Partner Program certificate of recognition, and free continuing education seminars for the veterinary staff.

The ASPCA APCC's Web site, www.aspc.org/apcc, offers a variety of resources for clinics and their clients including:

- Online toxicology articles (click on Resources for Vets)
- Lists of toxic plants, nontoxic plants, and the 10 most common poisonous plants
- Various toxicology hazard awareness tips (click on Did You Know?)
- *Make Your Pet's Home Poison-Safe*, an interactive tour that was designed especially for children so that they can learn early how to help protect their pets



▲ This interactive tour, designed specifically for children, is just one of the resources that can be found on the organization's Web site.

CONCLUSION

The ASPCA APCC is dedicated to providing educational and expert toxicology support to the veterinary community as well as to pet owners and other animal health care providers. By incorporating the wealth of information gathered by the APCC and its unsurpassed knowledge systems, the center's veterinary toxicology team

strives – together with the veterinary community and animal guardians (such as pet owners) – to alleviate pain, fear, and suffering in animals. Contributing to the expansion of the knowledge base of veterinary toxicology and sharing that information is an important component of preventing potential pain and suffering in animals and saving lives. VI