

# **Some Like it Hot: Manning an Emergency Poison Call Center**

*by*  
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It is just before 5 PM on a Friday evening, and one veterinary technician is just beginning her shift. Although she has no examination room or diagnostic equipment, she has a steady stream of patients - many of whom are in urgent need of care from a veterinary professional with her qualifications. She is well trained in the field of toxicology - the science of poisons and how they affect the body.

## **What is the APCC?**

Some people might consider a job talking on the phone all day to be mundane work. However, for the technicians employed at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)-Animal Poison Control Center (APCC), nothing could be further from the truth. For over 50,000 cases each year, these dedicated professionals provide veterinary personnel and pet owners alike with emergency veterinary services in which every minute could mean the difference between life and death.

Animal Poison Control Center technicians manage incoming calls 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. A critically important initial step in this process is to obtain thorough patient and exposure histories. Many of the calls received each day are handled by the center's technicians, who provide medical assistance by using substance management protocols (developed by technicians and approved by one of the center's veterinary toxicologists) or by consulting directly with a staff veterinarian. Technicians also play a critical role in obtaining case outcome data. With the help of the center's veterinary assistants, technicians conduct approximately 33,000 follow-up calls each year.

In addition to their daily duties, APCC technicians are involved in a variety of ancillary activities. These include writing publications for professional and lay journals, developing new substance management protocols, assisting veterinarians with toxicology-related research, and giving presentations to both the public and the veterinary community.

## **Hotline History**

The APCC is the nation's only animal-oriented 24-hour emergency poison hotline. The center was founded in 1978 at the College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign under the direction of Dr. William Buck, a pioneering veterinary toxicologist. Dr. Buck and his graduate students first started handling round-the-clock calls using a paging service.

Although initially designed to serve Illinois only, word of the service and its value spread quickly when the center's telephone number was broadcast on a national radio program and appeared on the label of a popular rodenticide. As the volume of calls continued to grow, the financial needs to maintain the center and its staff also increased.

In late 1995, the ASPCA learned of the APCC's struggle to exist. Representatives from the ASPCA visited the center and concluded that the service would be a perfect addition to the array of programs already provided by their organization. In 1996, the ASPCA acquired the APCC from the University of Illinois and the call center moved into its current facility in Urbana, Illinois.

The first certified veterinary technician joined the APCC in 1986. Since then, the call center's staff of 50 has grown to include 19 veterinarians (five of whom are diplomates of the American Board of Veterinary Toxicology), 11 certified technicians, and nine veterinary assistants.

## **Hotline Calls**

On a busy shift, hotline technicians may handle as many as 50 cases. Although many calls are fairly routine (e.g., dogs eating herbicide-treated grass, cats salivating excessively after being misted with a flea spray), staff members have seen their share of the unusual. For example, one evening a technician received a call from a veterinarian regarding a 3-pound, 3-month-old kitten that had tumbled out of a 13<sup>th</sup>-floor window. According to the veterinarian making the call, the owners of the kitten ran down to the street to retrieve the animal and proceeded to give him some infant acetaminophen drops - mistakenly thinking they were easing any pain the kitten may have been experiencing as a result of the fall. The veterinarian was instructed to give the kitten activated charcoal to help adsorb the acetaminophen. Fortunately, the kitten survived the ordeal with no adverse effects - only a fractured deciduous canine tooth.

Another technician handled a call involving a 50-pound standard poodle and his "partner in crime," a 50-pound golden retriever. While left alone at home for several hours, one or both dogs chewed up a bottle of prednisone (ingesting 15 tablets), obliterated two tubes of different otic preparations, and then after breaking open an urn, feasted on the ashes of the owner's beloved cat. These two cavorting canines were also lucky because neither of them developed any significant clinical problems from their memorable escapade. The caller was advised to monitor the dogs for signs of gastrointestinal irritation and was also informed that mild to moderate polyuria/polydipsia and panting could result from the prednisone ingestion. If these signs occurred, the caller was instructed to contact the center.

The calls that APCC technicians handle are not always so humorous, nor do they all have happy endings. Callers are often extremely anxious because a pet they consider to be a cherished family member has just ingested a foreign substance. They are concerned that serious consequences may result or the animal may already be exhibiting a problem. One call came from an upset owner whose pet duck had just ingested an unknown quantity of organophosphate insecticide granules. During the first moments of the call, the duck went from being severely dyspneic to dying in the owner's arms. In this unfortunate instance, the focus of the call had shifted from poison control to grief counseling - which is another important responsibility of staff technicians.

## One APCC, Many Career Paths

Managing calls on the hotline is not the only role APCC technicians play. The center's certified veterinary technicians hold a variety of positions. One technician is directly involved in the development of Antox™, the APCC's internal database. This database contains different libraries as well as information on more than 30,000 products and substances. Another technician manages corporate relations by supervising the daily operations of the Animal Product Safety Service and developing and maintaining key relationships with corporate personnel. Other technicians are responsible for updating and maintaining the center's public web site, managing staff technicians and assistants, maintaining Animal Product Safety Service client and case records, and managing the software needed for the center's information systems. In addition to these individual responsibilities, all the technicians devote time to the hotline to keep abreast of the daily operations and needs of the APCC.

## A Bright Future

The APCC has come a long way since its modest beginnings in 1978. To keep up with the ever-increasing demands of a rapidly growing call volume, the center continually makes improvements in telecommunications and computer systems technology. A \$45 consultation fee is charged per case to help offset expenses. Technicians and veterinarians are regularly added to the staff to ensure that callers are provided with prompt, professional medical assistance. As the APCC continues to evolve, new challenges and opportunities for both current and future staff members seem limitless.

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