



American Association of Poison Control Centers

NEWS RELEASE

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Poison Centers at Forefront in Identifying New Public Health Threats *Despite Essential Services, Funding Cuts Jeopardize Poison Centers*

ALEXANDRIA, VA – America’s 57 poison centers are among the first to identify emerging public health threats, most recently leading to the DEA’s ban on bath salts and synthetic marijuana. Despite the life-saving services provided by poison centers, however, state and federal funding cuts jeopardize the future of a nationwide poison center system, according to Dr. Richard C. Dart, president of the American Association of Poison Control Centers (AAPCC).

In the past two years alone, U.S. poison centers were the first to raise the alarm about toxic products marketed as bath salts and synthetic marijuana sold as incense or potpourri. In addition, they identified health issues associated with energy drinks and tracked the incidence of numerous food-borne illnesses. Several poison centers also served as a public health hotline providing information and medical advice during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

“U.S. poison centers are remarkably effective in detecting new public health threats and poisonings,” Dart said. “Often just a few calls to poison center are sufficient for them to raise the alarm to local, state and federal health organizations. Unfortunately, recent funding cuts have created a crisis for poison centers and endanger the nation’s poison center system.”

The poison center network is a unique nationwide health-care system. Calls to the nationwide toll-free Poison Help line 1-800-222-1222 connect people with their local poison centers, which provide free, confidential, expert medical advice to people who have been exposed to a poison.

Information about every call is uploaded automatically every few minutes into the National Poison Data System. If the data exceed a certain threshold or fit certain criteria, an alert goes to a group of toxicologists and epidemiologists from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the AAPCC, who work to determine if the public’s health is threatened. This process provides an early warning system that can identify outbreaks and anticipate new cases.

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“The poison center network is the only health-care system in the United States that is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week where people can speak to a health-care professional free of charge,” said Deborah A. Carr, AAPCC executive director. “The medical experts in this remarkable system work every moment of every day to safeguard the health of every American.”

Despite the life-saving services and health-care cost savings provided by poison centers, they currently face a funding crisis. The annual cost of operating the nation’s 57 poison centers is about \$150 million. Funding from the federal government accounts for about 15 percent of the total funding; the rest comes from state governments, hospitals and other sources. America’s poison centers suffered a federal funding cut of 25 percent in March 2011 and a second federal funding cut of 14 percent in December 2011, on top of budget cuts at the state and local level, which are making it difficult for poison centers to provide services to the American people.

“Our representatives in Washington, D.C., and in state legislatures across the country are in the process of making difficult budget decisions,” Dart said. “As they do so, it’s important they carefully consider the impact of those decisions on the health of the American people. The millions of Americans who rely on poison centers each year illustrate the importance of a system of medical call centers that safeguard the health of our friends, neighbors and family members.”

To learn more about the vital role of poison centers in the nation’s public health system, read Dr. Dart’s article “The Secret Life of America’s Poison Centers” published in the January 2012 issue of the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. The article is available at [http://www.annemergmed.com/article/S0196-0644\(11\)01802-6/fulltext](http://www.annemergmed.com/article/S0196-0644(11)01802-6/fulltext).

For more information, the media may contact Loreeta Canton, AAPCC communications manager, at 703.894.1863 or canton@aapcc.org.

The AAPCC supports the nation’s 57 poison centers in their efforts to treat and prevent drug, consumer product, animal, environmental and food poisoning. Members staff the Poison Help hotline at 1-800-222-1222 that provides free, confidential, expert medical advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year from toxicology specialists, including nurses, pharmacists, physicians and poison information providers. In addition, the AAPCC maintains the only poison information and surveillance database in the United States, providing real-time monitoring of unusual poisoning patterns, chemical exposures and other emerging public health hazards. The AAPCC partners with federal agencies such as HRSA and CDC, as well as private industry.

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