



Professor Simon Thomas

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Poisons Service Strategies to Reduce Poisoning: A UK Perspective

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Poisoning is common across the world, causing thousands of deaths and consuming substantial healthcare resources. Many poisoned patients die before they reach hospital, including in developed countries, underlining the importance of prevention. Poisons centers have a critical role in advocating for poisoned patients and supporting preventative strategies because of their expertise and the data they hold.

Some countries (e.g. the USA) fund poisons control centers with specific responsibilities for prevention. This is not the case in the UK, but the poisons centers constituting the UK National Poisons Information Service (NPIS) work closely with responsible agencies to develop preventative strategies. Unlike poisons centers in most other countries, the NPIS does not receive enquiries from the general public, so cannot provide individual preventative advice to enquirers.

The NPIS provides written advice to the public for prevention of poisoning via its website and also supports prevention advice from the National Health Service. The NPIS has also used the media to disseminate preventative messages on poisons such as adder bites, new psychoactive substances, toxic mushrooms and poisonous plants.

The largest poisoning prevention role for the NPIS has been the provision of information to government about poisoning and potential preventative interventions. Recent examples include (a) information to support legal control of new psychoactive substances and provision of data subsequently demonstrating reductions in clinical enquiries relating to these, (b) statistics on enquiries and fatalities caused by dinitrophenol, with impact assessment of actions taken by government agencies, (c) identifying to medicines regulators causes and potential solutions for accidental medication overdose (d) reducing poisoning mortality by supporting market withdrawal of co-proxamol and pack size restrictions for paracetamol (e) alerting public health agencies to the dangers of e-cigarette refills, especially to children. The NPIS is also active in preventing morbidity from poisons exposure by encouraging availability of appropriate antidotes, antivenoms, laboratory analyses and other interventions needed for patient management.

While this presentation gives a UK perspective, similar strategies have also been valuable in the Asia Pacific region and could be rolled out more widely, for example legislation resulting in reduced pesticide-related mortality in Sri Lanka.

Poisons centers are encouraged to understand the epidemiology and causes of poisoning in their own countries, monitor their data for signals of importance, plan and assess the impact of preventative strategies with other responsible agencies and stakeholders.