

Almaty's Successful Poison Control Hotline

Effective Communications Strategies Help Make Kazakhstan's First Physician-answered Call-in Service a Success

By KATHRYN UTAN

A young mother, distraught because her two-year-old son has swallowed some household cleaning liquid . . . an elderly man who took more than the prescribed dosage of his blood pressure medication . . . a rural physician who is not sure of the proper treatment in the case of a factory worker exposed to toxic chemicals . . . All three of these people require immediate and specific medical information, but where can they find it quickly and reliably? In Kazakhstan, at least, they can pick up the phone and call the Almaty Toxicology Information Center Hotline to receive detailed instructions from qualified doctors any time, day or night.

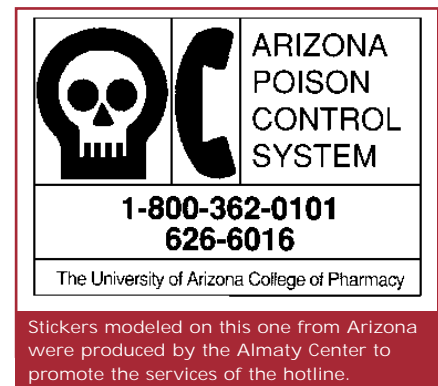
Located at the Republican Toxicology Center at the Almaty City Emergency Hospital, the main purpose of the Center is to offer both healthcare professionals and the general public specific information—toxic dose levels, clinical symptoms,

and methods of treatment, for example—about different chemical substances that may be involved in acute or chronic exposures. Other objectives include improving the quality of treatment for cases of poisoning; providing information about safe use of chemicals and pharmaceuticals; implementing poisoning prevention programs; and collecting and analyzing statistical data regarding chemical exposures. The project was initially sponsored by the now graduated AIHA Almaty/Tucson partnership in connection with the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center in Tucson and the Republican Toxicology Center.

The Center, which has been under the direction of Dr. Elzhan Birtanov since its inception in 1996, stands out as an example for other facilities wishing to promote their services in an effective manner. From the very beginning, the Center has efficiently used public communication tools to make both the public and healthcare providers aware of its hotline and other services. According to Birtanov, posters, brochures, telephone and ambulance stickers with the Center's phone number on them, lectures, presentations, advertisements, and interviews with broadcast and print journalists have proved effective means for publicizing the opening of the Center—and continue to



Brochures like this one inform citizens about poisonous plants and mushrooms. The back of the brochure (left side) lists other types of information available at the Center and by calling the hotline, whose number is listed at the bottom of the pamphlet.



Stickers modeled on this one from Arizona were produced by the Almaty Center to promote the services of the hotline.

keep the public informed of its programs and services.

“We actually started promoting the service the same day the Center opened,” Birtanov explains. “We organized a big presentation that day—April 5, 1996—and our partners from Tucson along with different healthcare and city authorities and the media all participated.” And the Center, which, on average, produces one news release each week, still uses the media to promote its services. “We have developed relationships with most of the media outlets in Almaty—when we have some important information we want to bring to the



Dr. Elzhan Birtanov answers the phones of the Republican Toxicology Center Hotline.

Photo courtesy of Elzhan Birtanov.

public's attention, we call up these journalists, but very often members of the media call us when they need news stories. . . . we provide information about poisonings and ways to prevent them, for example, and they give our telephone number out in the broadcast," he continues.

This give-and-take relationship with the media and savvy use of public relations techniques has worked well. In 1999, the hotline service received an average of 100 calls a week, Birtanov says. "Ninety percent of the calls come from the general public and around 10 percent come from healthcare professionals. All are answered by staff physicians of the Toxicology Information Center and are free of charge." The Information Center and hotline primarily serve the 1.2 million citizens of Almaty, but also receive calls from other regions throughout the country.

Although local health authorities and government officials were at first reluctant to support the project, the Center has since received favorable responses from all quarters. "The most difficult part at the beginning was getting additional funding for a service that had never before existed in our country . . . also, many officials didn't believe such a service could successfully operate in Almaty," Birtanov says. "But we felt it was important because in accordance with current international standards, a modern clinical toxicology care system should include such a service. The public has been especially enthusiastic—this is the first hotline in Kazakhstan where people can get free advice from a physician—and the medical community and local authorities gladly support our poisoning prevention projects."

Highlighting the fact that people are still making use of the service four years after its inception as one of the major successes of the Toxicology Information Center, Birtanov also notes that the facility participates in the INTOX Project of

WHO's International Program on Chemical Safety and is a member of the European Association of Poison Centers and Clinical Toxicologists. The Center also received a \$20,000 Soros Foundation grant in 1997 to promote its services. And it keeps current on the latest developments in the field thanks to quarterly updates of POISINDEX, which are generously donated by the MicroMedex corporation in Englewood, Colorado.

According to Birtanov, representatives

Strategies for Developing a Health Promotion Campaign

continued from page 25

and health education issues such as domestic violence, STD prevention, decreasing alcohol and drug consumption, smoking cessation, and healthy lifestyles. The TV guests, who are specialists from different medical areas, answer questions posed by TV viewers. In this way, the media helps the department to efficiently provide immediate health information to community members.

With the help of "Radio Constanta," the department has developed a daily radio broadcast called "The Doctor's Advise," which focuses on prevention methods for different diseases. At the same radio station, every Saturday the department broadcasts a live, 30-minute interactive (call-in) show on drug consumption and HIV prevention.

Printed Media as Promoter

The department also runs a daily column called "Health is the Best" in the local journal *Cuget Liber (Free Thinking)*. The column is dedicated to preventive care and health education and promotion issues such as family planning methods and prevention of STDs, communicable diseases, obesity, cardiovascular disease, HIV/AIDS, and domestic violence. Readers of the newspaper have the opportunity to send in and receive answers to

from most of the other oblasts in Kazakhstan expressed interest in establishing similar services during the first Republican Toxicology Workshop held in April 1999 in Almaty. The cities of Astana, Chimkent, and Karaganda have already opened toxicology treatment units and plan to implement full information centers within the next two years. Other large administrative centers are expected to follow.

Kathryn Utan is a staff writer at AIHA.

questions about health problems from medical specialists.

Just as the department uses collected data to help determine which public health areas should be addressed through health education programs, the department also uses the media to research and obtain opinions from community members about their health concerns. Research results are often a starting point for additional health promotion and education activities. Thus, those people working in the media become healthcare collaborators as well as reporters.

The success of such strategies can be seen in the fact that in the last year, the local journal *Cuget Liber* increased in circulation and listening/viewing rates for the hours the radio and TV shows are broadcast went up, meaning the audience receiving Constanta's public health messages has grown.

Loti Popescu, MD, works in the Constanta Health Promotion and Health Education Department. She writes the daily "Health is the Best" column for Free Thinking and develops a daily radio broadcast called "The Doctor's Advise." Daniel Verman, MD, is head of the Constanta Health Promotion and Health Education Department and producer of the TV talk show "Together for Health." The department also broadcasts a live, 30-minute, weekly, call-in talk show on drug consumption and HIV prevention at Radio Constanta, which is developed by Verman.