

Number of Poison Center one to remember

Admittedly, it's a most unusual way to begin a column. With a phone number.

Write this one down: (800) 222-1222. It's a lot better to have it and not need it instead of needing it and not having it.

That's the number for the Georgia Poison Center, one of 58 such centers across the US. Every day, anywhere from 200-300 folks call the center.

Whether the poison is swallowed, in the eye, on the skin, inhaled or via a bite, the center is staffed 24/7 by someone who can help.

It's difficult to believe that the center, the only one for Georgia, fields some 80,000-85,000 calls every year.

As a parent who has had to handle a panicky situation, I can attest to the professionalism and calming conversation that's dispensed.

But Dr. Stephanie Hom, the center's assistant director, is not quite feeling the love she used to.



MIKE TASOS
Columnist

Calls are dropping while trips to the hospital are staying roughly the same.

It seems online search engines have become popular as a means of handling a crisis. Now it takes about 30 seconds to get through the menu and reach someone qualified to handle any crisis.

During a recent visit, Stephanie said that 80 to 85 percent of the center's calls come from home. The rest come from hospitals looking for help.

In my day job, I work for a pharmaceutical company that has a drug used by hospitals to treat acetaminophen overdoses. It may be hard to fathom, but a lot of people, either intentionally or by accident, take enough cold pills that could result

in the loss of the only liver we have.

Stephanie's folks know all about this and can help hospital personnel or an affected individual.

Things really start cranking between 3 and 11 pm.

As the weather continues to warm, it's like the Christmas rush for Stephanie's crew. There are many things that can sting or bite. So naturally, the conversation turned to snakes.

Now I know that FCN columnist Len Robbins has his own unique plan for eradicating snakes.

Any snake he encounters gets a one-way ticket to snake heaven. I know others who feel inclined to jump on that bandwagon. Sometimes the snakes get in a shot of their own.

"We have gotten around 400 snakebite calls in the past two years. None were fatal," Stephanie said.

And that's the snakebites that get reported. She says don't worry if a green snake tags you.

There are no poisonous green snakes in Georgia.

But the most interesting call Stephanie remembers came in last November from south Georgia. It involved a 22-year-old from Jacksonville, Fla., who had been bitten by a black mamba snake.

An untreated bite from one of these snakes means you have less than 30 minutes to live.

Now I've seen those suckers on Animal Planet and feel safe. I've seen them at the zoo. Even

with the thick glass, I'm forming a way to get away quick. Just in case.

So this guy tested the odds when he was bitten. He was taken to a south Georgia hospital. Naturally, there was no mamba antivenin on hand.

Calls were placed to Zoo Atlanta. A zoo security guard was roused (remember it was 2 a.m. on a Monday) and the antivenin was located.

In the meantime, the man was taken to a large hospital in Jacksonville.

The zoo in that city also had antivenin. The man lived and has since vowed to get out of the poisonous snake business.

Numerous folks spent a lot of time helping. Stephanie said it's what

the Poison Center does. Cool under pressure. Stephanie was grateful for the help and wrote "thank-yous" to those who helped in Atlanta and Jacksonville.

She knows that the mamba came out of this in fine fettle, now residing at the Jacksonville Zoo.

She's not certain if the Florida man took the time to thank those who helped him survive his brush with death.

If anyone knows him, a phone call to Stephanie and her folks should be at the top of his "to-do" list. Her number is at the top of the column.

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