

Toxicological Information- und Data Network - A European Challenge? Workshop, Berlin 9th - 10th September, 2002

III Role of Poison Centre Data for Risk Assessment

III.2 Identification of Substances and Products – Experiences of Berlin Poison Centre

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In about 300 cases every year out of 14 000 requests concerning household products or chemicals problems arise concerning the proper identification of a product or substance, namely in childhood accidental ingestions. The total number is even higher, because we exclude requests concerning frequently occurring substances of low toxicity (Lovejoy 1994) like soaps, non-medicinal shampoos and cosmetic creams and lotions, where correct identification of the trade name seems negligible, because no inherent toxic risks exist between the different brands.

Problems in product identification arise from the telephone **communication process** between caller (lay person or health care professional) on one side and poison centre specialists on the other, they arise due to the fact, that the incriminated **product is not at hand** at the time of consultation (50% of the 300 cases), they arise finally from the product itself, namely its **labeling**, which follows marketing views rather than facilitating proper identification of the trade name by lay people or unexperienced doctors. Aspects like compound names scattered throughout the label, name prefixes or suffixes, producers or distributors name as part of the trade name, abbreviation of producers name, additional cifers or letters as part of the trade name, and the general variety of equally looking and sounding names in large series of products might cause confusion on the side of the caller as well as of the poison centre specialist, who tries to coordinate the information received on the phone with the (mostly) electronic product information at the poison centre. Even by careful history taking a definite product identification is sometimes not possible, leading to unnecessary medical treatments or a prolongation of hospital and first aid stays.

An easy and to our experience fast and reliable, at the same time unequivocal identification of household cleaning and washing products in Germany has been made possible by the mandatory eight-digit UBA number (Federal Institute of the Environment) imprinted on all washing and cleaning products. Lay people are routinely asked by our specialists to look for this eight-digit number rather than for scattered parts or suffixes of the brand name, which generally leads to a rapid and correct identification of the product.

Two problems need to be addressed with this splendid solution:

1st. The Federal Institute of the Environment UBA is not allowed by law to give its product information directly to the 10 German poison centres and to provide them with a complete actual list of all ist UBA-numbers correlated with the product name and its composition,
2nd. The UBA – number system only comprises washing and cleaning products, thus excluding all other household products, herbicides, do-it-yourself-products and of course industrial products.

Nevertheless rapid product identification in cases of emergency by an easily detectable number or code on all labels has been shown to be the most reliable way in our daily routine at the poison centre.

Lovejoy FH, Robertson WO, Woolfe AD. Poison centers, poison prevention, and the pediatrician. Pediatrics 1994;94(2):220-224