

Supporting the Establishment of an Ethiopian Poisons Centre

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OBJECTIVE

As part of an International Health Regulations [1] strengthening project, Public Health England and the UK National Poisons Information Service have been supporting St Peter's Hospital, Addis Ababa to establish the first poisons centre in Ethiopia.

METHODS

An in-country needs assessment and a literature review of epidemiology of poisoning in Ethiopia have informed the development of a clinical toxicology staff training programme comprising six modules over two years. The programme combined lectures with practical workshops on effective use of poisons information databases, as well as mentoring training, that included "mock" poison enquiry calls to poisons centre trainees followed by evaluation and feedback. Physicians were identified to undertake additional distance learning in clinical toxicology adapted from a UK-based curriculum [2] and GETUP [3]. Placements at established poisons centres for Ethiopian trainees were also planned.



Demonstration of carbon monoxide biomonitoring

RESULTS

Three training missions were delivered, including modules focused on pesticides, opioids, heavy metals, traditional medicines and operational aspects of poisons centres. Technical challenges identified whilst developing the information service related mainly to lack of reliable internet and phone systems. These were partially overcome by development of a database for recording enquiry data and provision of computer tablets with poisons database TOXBASE[®] installed, which can operate offline. Capacity building challenges involved assessing and identifying potential improvements in local toxicological laboratory services and improving the national availability of antidotes via collaboration with the Ethiopian Ministry of Health and Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI). The clinical treatment unit has treated over 500 patients since 2018. The poisons information centre opened in June 2019 and started answering a small number of phone enquiries from local healthcare professionals during office hours. In 2020, as a result of the clinical facilities being repurposed to treat COVID-19 patients the further development of the poisons centre was put on hold by St Peter's.



Toxicology Centre, St Peter's Hospital

Ethiopia Poisons Centre Access Database

Box 1: Key Lessons Identified

- Good situational awareness of specific poisoning hazards at a national level is important to target training and poisons centre development.
- Emphasis should be placed on both technical capacity building (training) and institutional strengthening; workforce development and identification of champions is important for sustainability.
- It is important to understand technical and political levers and barriers which may influence the development of the poisons centre, at the institutional and national levels. This includes agreement of key responsibilities for each partner at the outset of the project.
- Poisons centres are an important contributing stakeholder for multi-sectoral chemical incident preparedness and response systems and are a key suggested member of a stakeholder chemical technical working group.

CONCLUSION

Despite numerous challenges, St Peter's Hospital developed a functional poisons centre, incorporating treatment of poisoned patients and a limited information service. Potential next steps for the development of the poisons centre would be: continued awareness raising of the service; training and capacity building to enable expansion of the poisons centre to a national level, 24 hour operation and development of surveillance capability. The approach taken to the establishment of a poisons centre at St Peter's Hospital was designed to be transferable to other countries and also supported an update to the WHO Guidelines for Establishing a Poisons Centre [4]. The key lessons identified as part of the project are summarised in Box 1.

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