Bottom-lining the ‘zero-sum’ game

The Competition Commission’s previous interventions in the private healthcare market may have had unintended consequences (arguably skewing the balance of power between dominant hospitals and medical aids, for example). However, the latest probe into unsustainable distortions in this sector deserves the support of all players – not least in their own self-interest. In 

Editor’s Choice

Don’t blame the products for poisoning – blame the end-users!

An editorial[2] and two articles from the Tygerberg Poison Information Centre (TPIC) at Tygerberg Hospital,[3,4] on which hospitals and practitioners depend for advice on poisoning, reveal the scope of the problem. The good news is that the majority of cases reflect accidental exposure. We may think that pesticides are responsible for more human incidents, but the TPIC studies show that agricultural use of pesticides is responsible for fewer than 1% of exposures. The bad news is that end-users of poisonous substances are highly irresponsible in their storage and use! Safe storage, as directed on their labels, does not exist in most households, with risk of exposure for children and domestic animals. The illegal sale of decanted pesticides in unmarked containers by street vendors further compounds the problem.

Healthcare professionals have insufficient knowledge about pesticides to be able to arrive at the correct diagnosis of toxicity and are frequently unable to accurately classify the agent(s) responsible for the patient’s illness. This is where expert advice from a PIC can facilitate correct treatment. A major ‘culprit’ is the carbamate pesticide aldicarb, sold as ‘rat poison’ (variously named ‘rat poison,’ ‘ratxen,’ ‘two step,’ ‘galephirime’ or ‘halethrim’). Aldicarb is sold legally in unlabelled sachets. It is a cholinesterase inhibitor and not a long-acting anticoagulant.

In the TPIC’s experience the most common exposures involve paracetamol and household pesticides such as anticoagulant rodenticides, pyrethroids, some cholinesterase inhibitors and irritant/corrosive cleaning agents, all of which are readily accessible on supermarket shelves. Begging the question: should these not be sold, as cigarettes and alcohol are, in restricted areas of the supermarkets to make the general public aware of their potential toxicity?

Vaccination against HPV for girls … and boys?

At any given time, 20% of women harbour cervical human papillomavirus (HPV), and two-thirds of invasive cervical cancers are attributable to oncogenic types 16 or 18. It gets worse: individuals infected with HIV are at an increased risk for HPV-related cancers.

The World Health Organization recommends that routine HPV vaccination be included in national immunisation programmes. Two vaccines, Cervarix (GlaxoSmithKline) (against HPV types 16 and 18), and Gardasil (Merck & Co.) (against HPV types 6, 11, 16 and 18) represent a major breakthrough for the prevention of cervical cancer. Although licensed for use in both the public and private healthcare sectors in SA, they are currently only available in the latter sector.

A vaccination demonstration project in KZN[5] has shown a high uptake, using school health teams to undertake the HPV vaccination of girls in schools. Its recommendations are relevant to a future national rollout of school-based HPV vaccination, as part of the integrated Department of Health primary healthcare and school health programmes.

Screening for HPV

High-risk human papillomavirus (hrHPV)-based screening tests offer the prospect of improving cervical cancer screening programmes. Women attending public sector primary healthcare clinics were invited to participate in Richter et al.[6] cervical cancer screening study. The results were unsettling. The prevalences of HPV infection and abnormal cytology were much higher than previously reported, reflecting sexual behavioural patterns, the largely unscreened and therefore untreated status of the female population, and the high background HIV prevalence.

Hepatitis B guideline 2013

Many South Africans have chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection, leading to illness ranging from a low viraemic immune control state to progressive chronic hepatitis, and the potential to develop
cancer, cirrhosis, liver failure and hepatocellular carcinoma. There have been significant therapeutic advances over the past decade, and the decision to treat and the choice of therapy depend on both the phase of chronic infection and on patient factors. These therapeutic complexities are addressed in our 2013 guideline.71

**Autism in Izindaba**

The SAIMJ hopes that in this especially vulnerable country rife with HIV/AIDS, TB and malnutrition, doctors and the public won’t shy away from vaccinating our children. The link between autism and the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccination has been thoroughly discredited;72 the research was fraudulent. Following a General Medical Council (GMC) investigation and findings that ‘the three authors acted unethically and dishonestly in preparing the research into the MMR vaccine’, the editors of the Lancet announced on 2 February 2010 that they ‘fully retract this paper from the published record.’73 The case stands as one of the worst cases of fraudulent research in history! Our children (provided they aren’t immune-compromised) deserve to receive whatever vaccines are available!

**TB diagnosis in children**

SA has one of the highest TB burdens in the world, after India and China, and one of the health targets set in the 2010 Millennium Development Goals is to halt and reverse the incidence of TB by 2015. Diagnosing (disseminated) TB in children is difficult: often spumon can’t be obtained, necessitating gastric aspirates. Even then, identification of acid-fast bacilli is possible in less than 15% of samples and only 30 - 40% prove positive on culture. A positive tuberculin skin test, while reactive in most children within 3 - 6 weeks after initial infection, may be delayed for up to 3 months. False-negative TSTs occur in up to 10% of children who are TB culture-positive, particularly in the context of severe TB illness, malnutrition, immunosuppression and the presence of other severe infections.

A paper from Red Cross Hospital suggests a low threshold for undertaking bone marrow aspirate and trephine biopsy, especially in HIV-positive children in whom cytopenias, organomegaly and fever arouse suspicion of disseminated TB.

**Validation of the revised South African Triage Scale (SATs) for children**

A survey of 2 000 children, presenting to 6 emergency units, has confirmed that the revised paediatric SATs is a robust and safe triage tool for children.74 With a 91% sensitivity and a 95% negative predictive value, it has excellent ability to identify potentially seriously ill children.

**Editor’s Choice**

Joy El Veale is director of the Tygerberg Poison Information Centre, within the Department of Medicine in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University. She is a member of the Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences of South Africa and of the European Association of Poison Centres and Clinical Toxicologists. Her current research interests encompass the use of traditional herbal remedies in pregnancy and childbirth and, under the rubric epidemiology of poisoning and toxicovigilance, she is particular concerned with amitraz poisoning, analgesic poisoning, medication errors, initial management of poisoning, and childhood poisoning due to over-the-counter preparations and household chemicals.

Gerhard Verdoorn is the head of the Griffon Poison Information Centre and consultant for the Association of Veterinary and Coop Associations of South Africa. He holds an MSc and PhD. His post-doctoral research involved the synthesis of prostaglandin analogues, anti-cancer agents and natural toxins. He has published extensively in plant chemosystematics, toxicology, avian genetics and conservation biology. His current work concerns the responsible use of pesticides and investigating pesticide misuse and pesticide-related crime, as well as advising on human and animal poisoning, environmentally compatible pest management and responsible use of pesticides. He has worked extensively in the non-governmental conservation sector on endangered species, notably vultures, and the poisoning of wildlife. He lectures in organic chemistry and conservation biology at the University of Johannesburg and other academic institutions.

**References**