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The IPC Celebrates 65 Years of Keeping Illinois Safe
Nation's oldest poison center marks milestone anniversary

It's the early 1950s, and you're a physician working the night shift in the emergency department. You and your colleagues are stumped by a patient who arrives with symptoms of an accidental poisoning. What do you do?

For many healthcare professionals, in Chicago and elsewhere, the answer was to call Louis Gdalmán, director of the pharmacy at then-known St. Luke's Hospital in Chicago. Gdalmán had developed a national reputation as an expert on managing acute and chronic poisoning, and he put this knowledge to use, answering questions from healthcare providers at any hour, day or night.

In 1953, Gdalmán, in conjunction with the American Academy of Pediatrics, leveraged this expertise to establish the first poison center in the U.S. That operation has grown from a single phone at St. Luke's into today's Illinois Poison Center (IPC), which serves the state's more than 12 million residents. Along with the medical science, the IPC's role, structure and services have expanded dramatically in the succeeding 65 years. However, its mission remains the same: reducing the incidence and injury of poisoning in Illinois.

As recognized by [Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner](#) and [Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel](#), the IPC has a lot to be proud of. If their [testimonials](#) are any judge, Illinois residents and healthcare professionals agree. A selection of the IPC's top accomplishments is included below.

As they have been for decades, IPC experts are available to provide information and treatment advice 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, including holidays. If you suspect that you or someone you know has been exposed to a potentially harmful substance, please call the IPC at 800-222-1222. The call is confidential and free for the caller. To make sure the IPC's experts are always within reach, text "POISON" to 797979 to save the IPC's contact information in your smartphone. For more information, visit the IPC's website: <http://illinoispoisoncenter.org>.

Key Accomplishments

Among the many highlights, here are 6.5 of the IPC's key accomplishments from the last 65 years:

1. Starting a Trend

The pioneering poison control center at St. Luke's may have been the first of its kind, but it was hardly the last. Today, the U.S. is served by 55 poison centers.

2. Saving Countless Lives

Along with public health measures and public awareness campaigns, the expansion of poison centers was a critical factor in the 90 percent drop in the number of children dying from accidental poisonings during the second half of the 20th century. Today, the IPC's lifesaving work continues. In addition to the general public, emergency and admitting physicians and hospital staff rely on IPC recommendations when treating poisoning cases. More than one-third of the IPC's exposure cases come from healthcare facilities around the state.

3. Responding to Tylenol® Contamination

Following reports of multiple deaths due to Tylenol® contaminated with cyanide, the IPC collected valuable data and disseminated accurate information to the public while answering nearly 800 calls on Sept. 29, 1982, the day the crisis started – more than 10 times its normal volume. Furthermore, the IPC provided a secure location to store potentially dangerous Tylenol® products while the investigation was underway.

4. Revolutionizing Mushroom Identification

In 2003, IPC staff co-authored an [innovative study](#) on using digital images to identify mushrooms in Illinois. The published results showed that although photographs are not sufficient to positively identify mushroom species, they can be used to accurately diagnose and treat mushroom ingestion. Analyzing digital images to identify poisonous mushroom exposures has since become common practice for poison centers nationwide.

5. Protecting the Public from Synthetic Cannabinoids

Between 2011 and 2012, the IPC partnered with the Illinois Attorney General to minimize the harm from synthetic cannabinoids, which, at the time, could be bought in stores. Because of their joint efforts to identify and educate retailers about the harm caused by these drugs, more than 80 businesses voluntarily surrendered over \$500,000 worth of synthetic products. Following the program, the number of cases reported to the IPC on synthetic cannabinoids dropped from 33 percent higher than the national average to 60 percent lower than the national average.

The IPC once again stepped up to combat the dangers of synthetic cannabinoids during Illinois' recent outbreak of synthetic products [contaminated with rat poison](#). In partnership with the

Illinois Dept. of Public Health, the IPC was instrumental in tracking reported cases of patients harmed by these products and developing guidelines to assist physicians, pharmacists and other hospital staff in treating this rare poisoning.

6. Educating Illinois Residents and Healthcare Professionals

In addition to providing information through its toll-free 24/7 helpline (800-222-1222), the IPC educates the public on its services and how to prevent exposures to potentially harmful substances through its [website](#), “[My Child Ate...](#)” online resource, [blog](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#); its free, online [Poison Prevention Education Course](#), which is available to anyone who works or lives in Illinois; complimentary poison prevention materials; and a sizable volunteer network that hosts hundreds of events across the state every year.

For Illinois’ student healthcare professionals, the IPC offers a valuable learning experience through one- to six-week rotations that provide an overview of the IPC’s services and an intensive training in the field of toxicology.

6½. Furthering the Mission

Over the past 65 years, the IPC has built a track record of excellent service to the people of Illinois. However, the work is far from over. The IPC looks forward to continuing to partner with the state’s healthcare network to prevent harm in Illinois’ communities for many years to come!

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The Illinois Poison Center is a nonprofit health service that provides the people of Illinois with comprehensive and trusted information and treatment advice on potentially harmful substances via a toll-free, confidential 24-hour helpline staffed by specially trained physicians, nurses and pharmacists. 2018 marks the 65th anniversary of the nation’s oldest poison center. [Click here](#) to learn more about the Illinois Poison Center and its mission.