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TOXBASE on the internet

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TOXBASE, the clinical toxicology database of the UK National Poisons Information Service (NPIS), went on-line in 1983 using Viewdata technology.¹ Since then it has provided a 24 hour service, access being available at the cost of a local telephone call to any registered medical professional within the NHS with a Viewdata terminal or personal computer (PC).² There are currently more than 570 registered users who make around 50 000 computer accesses each year.

TOXBASE consists of approximately 13 000 substance/product monographs on pharmaceuticals, agricultural and industrial chemicals, household products, toiletries, plants, and venomous animals. Each monograph contains information on toxic ingredients, toxicity, features after overdose, and clinical management. In addition there is general information on gut decontamination, slang terms for drugs, paediatric poisoning, non-toxic plants, poisoning in pregnancy, laboratory services for selected centres, and availability of antidotes for selected toxins.

The top 10 substance types that were the subject of TOXBASE inquiries during 1998 were (in decreasing order) paracetamol, codeine/dihydrocodeine, salicylates, ibuprofen, diazepam, zopiclone, petroleum distillates, caffeine (as a component of compound analgesics), fluoxetine, and dothiepin. The top three have held their positions since at least 1995. Inquiries about dothiepin are decreasing and zopiclone increasing.³

The six centres of the NPIS also deal with more than 200 000 telephone inquiries on poisonings every year, and this workload has been increasing. Many of these inquiries are straightforward, but the call load prevents rapid access for inquiries about more serious cases. To address this issue the UK Departments of Health decided to promote the use of TOXBASE to hospitals and general practitioners for answering poisons inquiries, particularly those involving less toxic substances. This will

leave the more complicated issues involving serious poisonings and combinations of drugs for information staff and doctors.

TOXBASE is now available on the internet (<http://www.spib.axl.co.uk/>). To use the new TOXBASE a PC with Windows 95, 98, or NT and a frames enabled, Java compliant internet browser is required. This will typically be Microsoft Explorer version 4 (or above) or Netscape version 4 (or above). Access to the internet via either an NHSnet connection or a modem and access to an internet service provider is also needed. Those already registered for the old Viewdata version have been kept informed of developments and can use their current user name and password to access the database. Others, within the NHS, can register on-line. The existing Viewdata service will cease to operate at the end of 1999.

The new internet version of TOXBASE, with improved search and printing facilities, should lead to increased uptake, particularly in England and Wales (most in Scotland and Northern Ireland already use it). The ability to print key details on the management of a poisoning will assist in patient care, and promote best practice. It will remove the need for a "routine" call to the NPIS. NPIS centres will be involved in the promotion of TOXBASE in their locality. The new internet system will also have a feedback facility, which it is hoped will assist in data collection on the toxicology of unusual poisons and of new drugs. In this way the information provided on TOXBASE will be updated to reflect UK experience. Work will then start on a new improved version of the database, in consultation with UK toxicologists and TOXBASE user groups. Accident and emergency staff will therefore have a key role in developing the TOXBASE system for the future.

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