Drug and Poison Information Centre
Serving the Community and Saving Lives

It was late at night when the Drug and Poison Information Centre (DPIC) at the University Hospital (AKUH) received a frantic call from a mother whose two-year-old son had swallowed a number of tablets prescribed to her for hypertension. The hysterical mother had no idea what to do. The pharmacist at DPIC calmed her down, asked for the name of the medicine and quickly recommended required countermeasures and first aid treatment. The right piece of information at the right time helped save a life.

Established in 1995, DPIC was the first facility of its kind in Pakistan. A decade later, it continues to serve the community by providing timely advice on accidental drug intake and poisoning management, besides providing health care professionals with updated data on drug usage.

DPIC is a subsidiary of the Department of Pharmacy Services at AKUH and is headed by Abdul Latif Sheikh, Director of Pharmacy Services, who is also the Centre’s founder. The team of pharmacists at DPIC includes Shamim Raza, Senior Pharmacist and Area Coordinator for the Centre and Inpatient Pharmacy Services; Zahid Ghous, Clinical Pharmacist and DPIC Supervisor; and Salwa Zubair, Senior Pharmacist. The Centre operates round the clock, responds to approximately 70 calls a day and caters to health care staff and laypersons alike.

It is the Centre’s responsibility and mission to maintain up-to-date information on pharmaceutical products, dosage forms, combinations and treatment protocols. It provides drug evaluation for formulary addition, assists in formulary selection, organises and conducts continuing education sessions for health care professionals, participates in national symposiums, offers counselling to patients and addresses public forums to highlight key issues and latest trends.

Poisoning management is a DPIC speciality. The Centre gathers and disseminates information on various kinds of poisons available in Pakistan, their antidotes and/or supportive and symptomatic treatment. Another key activity is the provision of clinical pharmacy services in various critical care settings within the University Hospital. In this connection, a pharmacist from DPIC visits areas such as the Intensive Care Unit, Cardiac Care Unit and Stroke Unit to identify and solve drug-related problems.

DPIC also supervises Point of Care Pharmacist (PCP) services, a recent initiative that has helped improve the Hospital’s drug delivery system by placing pharmacists in patient care areas. By serving as a liaison between patients and physicians, the pharmacist becomes part of the Hospital’s multidisciplinary team which also includes doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and nutritionists.

The Centre is actively engaged in research related to drug investigations and prevention and treatment of poisoning. It regularly publishes pharmacy updates as well as a newsletter and reviews clinical drug trial protocols. In 2004, DPIC presented three abstracts at the International Pharmaceutical Federation Conference in Sydney, Australia, while three more were accepted by the Asian Management Conference in Hong Kong, Thailand. Amongst the DPIC’s pioneering work was the publication of antibiotics guidelines in 2004.

The Centre keeps track of banned or recalled drugs and aids the Ministry of Health, Government of Pakistan, in making decisions regarding the introduction or prescription of drugs. It also supports the activities of the AKUH Pharmacy and Therapeutic Committee as well as the Antibiotic Subcommittee.

DPIC’s continuing education initiatives are geared towards residents, nurses, pharmacists and intern. These programmes focus on increasing awareness of the mechanisms and implications of adverse drug reactions and medication error reporting, besides advising participants on how to most effectively utilise a pharmacist’s services. Meanwhile, the Centre’s Continuing Pharmacy Education (CPE) programmes provide credentialing for clinical pharmacists, amongst other services.

According to Abdul Latif Sheikh, the Centre has evolved into an authentic resource base for drug and poison related issues. “The Centre maintains comprehensive information on drug
therapy and a file on every available drug, and for this reason has become a role model for other institutions,” he says.

There is an urgent need for research in the areas of poisoning management and medication usage in Pakistan, adds Sheikh. DPIC is currently working towards establishing a database of poisons and chemicals available in the country as well as devising a system of training that will produce specialised toxicologists. In addition to promoting the rational use of medication, the Centre aims to expand its services to improve access to poison and medication related emergency advice.

First Allogeneic Bone Marrow Transplant at BMT Unit

AKUH reached a major milestone in July 2004 when its Bone Marrow Transplant (BMT) Unit carried out a successful allogeneic transplant, the first such procedure performed at the recently established facility. The recipient was a seven-year-old boy who became the third patient overall to be discharged from the BMT Unit.

Zain had been suffering from aplastic anaemia for the last one-and-a-half years. All previous treatment options, including immunosuppressive therapy, had failed and the patient was being maintained on regular platelet and blood transfusions.

Human Leucocyte Antigen (HLA) matching on family members revealed that Zain’s mother was a 100 per cent match and the boy was admitted to the BMT Unit where he received conditioning chemotherapy. On day zero, bone marrow was harvested from the mother along with peripheral blood stem cells and was subsequently infused to Zain. The donor, who had been placed under general anaesthesia, was discharged the same evening and is currently in good health. Zain engrafted on day +11 post-transplant, stayed stable and was able to go home with an unsupported haemoglobin level of 9.5 g/dl, white cell count of 5.7 and platelet level of 357,000.

The BMT Unit discharged its first patient earlier in July 2004 after successful treatment lasting 26 days. Inaugurated in April 2004, the BMT Unit at the University Hospital is specially designed for a select group of oncology and haematology patients, offering services to patients suffering from benign and malignant disorders such as aplastic anaemia, lymphoma, leukaemia and thalassaemia.

PhD Holder Heading Nursing Services Division at AKUH

AKU achieved yet another distinction in the field of nursing when its Hospital became the first in the country with a Pakistani PhD holder heading the Nursing Services Division.

Dr Khurshid Khowaja, who has been Director of Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH) Nursing Services Division since 2001, recently completed her PhD from the University of Ballarat, Australia. Balancing work and PhD studies with family commitments was no mean feat but then Dr Khowaja has been a dynamic leader since her school days. She was the first girl from Tando Bago, a remote town in Sindh’s district Badin, to complete matriculation from a predominantly boys school, clinching second position in Hyderabad.

She subsequently did her bachelors in economics in 1978 from the Hyderabad education board. Although communicating in English with foreign teachers at the University’s School of Nursing was a challenge in the early days, she nonetheless earned a gold medal along with her nursing diploma from AKU-SON. In addition, she completed a diploma in midwifery in first division from Kharadar Maternity Home in 1985. She subsequently served as Head Nurse, Assistant Manager and Associate Director before becoming a Director at AKUH.

 Courageous individuals have effected significant change in the profession of nursing, women like Florence Nightingale, who reformed nursing care, and Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross. “Likewise, AKUH nurses serving in clinical, administrative and academic roles can have a major impact on nursing in Pakistan,” says Dr Khowaja. “They can serve as role models and inspire others.”