



Dr. Steven Marcus

After 32 Years At the Helm of NJPIES, Director Dr. Marcus Has Seen It All

For more than three decades, it's been the place to call 24/7 in New Jersey when your child accidentally swallows a detergent pod or pills from the medicine cabinet. At the New Jersey Poison Information and Education System (NJPIES), trained doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other poison experts answer 60,000 calls a year about childhood lead poisoning, carbon monoxide poisoning, Ebola, wild mushrooms, alcohol poisoning, drug overdoses and other unintentional poisonings. As Executive and Medical Director of NJPIES for 32 years, medical toxicologist Dr. Steven Marcus has seen it all. He's retiring on June 30, 2016, so we asked him about his legacy as well as the calls he's answered over the years at 1-800-222-1222.

What is your proudest accomplishment at the helm of NJPIES?

The establishment of NJPIES. The greatest joy is knowing we have helped people during times of stress and fear. Recently an ICU physician told me I made a diagnosis—over the phone and with an ECG that was photographed by a cell phone and sent to me—which was missed by three physicians before I became directly involved.

Involvement in the public health response to a previously unreported neurological "disease" associated with eating eastern blowfish was also amazing. We were also involved in an outbreak of rogue botulism injections which nearly caused four deaths. The center also helped report the unexpected deaths of multiple patients at Somerset Medical Center, resulting in the 2003 arrest and conviction of nurse Charles Cullen and the end of his serial killings.

How have the issues phoned in to NJPIES changed over the years?

In the beginning, we were primarily dealing with children who consumed something in their environment. The level of toxicity this represented was much lower then. Today we get fewer calls, but the severity of the poisonings has increased.

Have many of the topics remained the same?

We still receive a lot of calls from parents concerned about adventuresome children. About 50 percent of our calls are related to medication.

Have you tracked the number of lives NJPIES has saved?

There is no way to attribute a life saved to us, but if we didn't stop Cullen from killing patients at a rate of at least four to five annually, that would be well over a hundred lives lost over the decades.

What have been the key issues people have called NJPIES about over the past three decades?

In terms of total volume, the types of calls are about the same. The major difference is that many people now look online for information before calling. It is frustrating to know they have "wasted" valuable time by not calling immediately. In some cases, we might have been able to prevent a critical illness if we intervened earlier.

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