

PHHS BLOCK GRANT SUCCESS STORY 2016

EMS POISON CONTROL SYSTEM

ALTERNATIVE DIET AIDS -- NOT WORTH THE RISK.

Issue: In the quest for better health, patients sometimes seek out alternative, herbal, or complementary treatments that are scientifically unsound and possibly even harmful¹. One example of this hazardous practice is the use of the seeds of the yellow oleander plant (*Thevetia peruviana*) for weight control. Yellow oleander is native to Mexico and is now established in Florida, Hawaii, and South Asia. Like the related cardiac medication digoxin, yellow oleander can cause serious cardiac complications.

Starting in 2012, the California Poison Control System (CPCS) began receiving calls from all over California about adults and children who reacted poorly to a product called “Almendara quema grasa” (fat-burning almond), a dieting aid processed in Mexico. Patients typically purchase the yellow oleander seeds from swap-meet vendors or Internet websites and are instructed to consume only a fraction each day to suppress appetite. However, this is a highly dangerous practice, as only two or three whole seeds of this plant can be fatal to an adult, and the packets have no childproofing or warning labels.

Intervention: A cluster of cases from Southern California hospitals allowed poison center investigators working with analytical labs to determine the origin and hazards associated with this dieting practice. When CPCS saw a rise in calls related to ingestion of yellow oleander seeds in 2012, staff began education and outreach to warn patients and physicians in California about the potential danger of these products. These warnings have continued through 2016. Other poison centers have shared their experiences with the yellow oleander seeds being used as a dietary agent.

Impact: Law enforcement and agricultural regulatory agencies are keenly aware of this hazard, but unfortunately, the surreptitious marketing of this product makes it difficult to intercept distribution. Therefore, CPCS staff have taken steps to educate physicians and patients in the Latino community, as well as local swap-meet and traditional-medicine vendors, about the hazards related to ingesting products containing yellow oleander seeds.

CPCS staff have generated educational messages and research findings² related to this hazard, actively educating the public and health care professionals about the hazards of yellow oleander dietary aids through the use of (1) community health programs, (2) health professional newsletters, (3) scientific meeting abstracts, and (4) peer-reviewed publications.