

# Regulating chemical retailers of household cleaning agents can help to lessen accidental poisoning in Jamaica

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**A**ccidental poisoning for children has been a decade long public health issue in Jamaica. Bleach being the main causative agent and a product that is used daily in households makes it a likely feature in the environment of a child (0-5years). The repeated efforts by the Ministry of Health and CARPIN on advising parents and guardians to put chemicals out of the reach of children stop from storing bleach and other household cleaning chemicals in juice bottles has become a familiar tune in the ears of many Jamaicans. But these incidents have not stopped the behavior of parents and guardians. What would be a national approach to accidental poisoning for children in Jamaica?

## Epidemiological transition of childhood poisoning

The trend for accidental poisoning for children 0-5 years has shifted over the past 30 years from kerosene, pesticide, pharmaceutical to bleach being the major causative agent. There has not been any analysis on the reason for the change but inference can be made to change in quality of life and organizational roles. The transition of kerosene oil for lighting to electric light in the homes of most Jamaicans has lessened the availability of kerosene in most homes, the enforcement of the Pesticides Act and consistent island-wide programmes by the Pesticides Control Authority of Jamaica could be one of the factors for the shift in pesticide poisoning, the pharmaceutical industry has been playing their role in educating parents about medication use and storage. However the use of childproof packages to retail medication would help to lessen the present events with medicinal poisoning in children.

The question that policymakers and key stakeholders should be asking and seeking to answer is: What organized approach and policy can be put in place to tackle the present issues with bleach poisoning by children in Jamaica?

Public education has been the main or only programme with no structured approach to the present situation.

## Cultural practices

The buying of bleach in drums by chemical retailers and the sale of bleach in bottles similar to that of syrup, ketchup and sodas are some of the cultural practices for the distribution of bleach in Jamaica. This practice has become such a norm that even in established organization it is the common practice of janitorial or housekeeping staff to collect cleaning agents in varied bottles which include soda bottles to carry out their daily

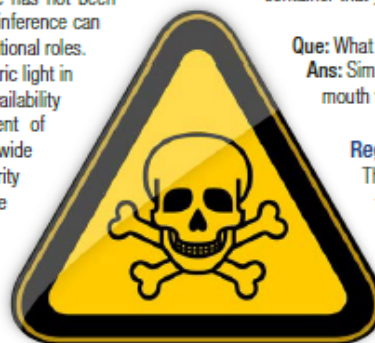
duties. There is no distinct difference in design and labeling for these containers and sometimes no labels or inadequate information being displayed.

Adults are often tricked in to mis-identity of bleach with water because of similar packaging and storage in a food area. What then can we expect from children?

The ability of children to open these bottles is undermined, while there is no specific restriction to the containers such as child proof, and no specific design to make the containers unattractive. What then do we expect these little adventurous children to do when they pounce upon these chemicals? Imagine for a while that you are an adventurous and explorative child with no understanding of differentiating a substance being placed in a container that you can only associate with food.

**Que:** What would be your exploring approach?

**Ans:** Simple to take the content of the container and put it in your mouth for the purpose of tasting.



## Regulating Chemicals retailers

The contradiction of telling parents to desist from using food look-alike containers, to store chemicals and allowing chemical retailers to distribute and accept the same containers for chemical resale has proven to be harmful to our children. So where do we go from here?

Regulating chemical retailers can help in changing the behavior of Jamaicans from repackaging household cleaning chemical in food look alike bottles (juice or drink bottles), to purchasing chemicals in standard containers which does not endanger the health of anyone especially our children. Household cleaning agents that are manufactured in Jamaica should follow a standard for packaging, labeling and distribution. This should not be left up to the seller or buyer to determine, but should be stipulated by the relevant regulating authority through legislations and policies to protect the lives of our children. Regulating chemicals can be an intervention to poison prevention in Jamaica.