

Closing poison center will cost state, patients, director says

By Hillary Chura
The Associated Press

Closing the Arizona poison center in January, as budget cuts may necessitate, will cost victims and others more than \$3 million in emergency room visits, its medical director said Tuesday.

The Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center has only enough money to operate until the first of the year, Dr. Leslie Boyer said. She also said reopening the center in July, the start of the next fiscal year, would cost more than keeping it open now.

The center receives about 75,000 calls a year about such problems as snake or scorpion stings and accidental ingestion of medicine and household products. Pharmacists and poison specialists staff its telephones 24 hours a day and help doctors treat patients, Boyer said.

"If we close in January, all those

pharmacists who work at the center will have to get jobs, and they'll leave. Every pharmacist on staff is earning \$15- to \$20,000 less than if they worked for a community pharmacy. They choose to work there because they love it," she said.

"We save lives, and we save money," she said. "I firmly believe this should be a public service. We save \$3.4 million a year in unnecessary emergency room expenses. More than \$1 million is accounted for with Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System and uninsured people."

No one at Gov. Fife Symington's office was available Tuesday afternoon to comment on the center's budget.

It costs about \$976,000 to run the center for a year. The state froze its \$450,000 budget in the 1988-89 fiscal year, and the University of Arizona picked up the

rest of its cost. The university, its own budget cut, said this summer that it couldn't afford to continue making up the deficit, said Dr. Ted Tong, the poison center's director.

The facility, based at the Arizona Health Sciences Center at the university, is one of 36 nationally certified regional poison centers. It helps maintain an anti-venom index that tells specialists what treatment a sting or bite merits, and it helps train doctors and pharmacists in poison treatment, Tong said. It employs 14 people.

"As the state's biggest triage center, we help worried citizens decide whether they must go to the emergency room or not. We help them treat their problem at home if possible. And for those who go to the hospital, we help their doctors diagnose and treat them," Boyer said.