

Yes, There Really is a Dr. Heimlich And He's Pushing More Uses for his Famous Maneuver

by Jim Ritter, Chicago Sun-Times, October 7, 2001

Twenty-six years after inventing the Heimlich maneuver, Dr. Henry Heimlich finally had an opportunity to try it himself.

Heimlich was having lunch last year when he was urgently called to the side of a man choking on his food. Heimlich wrapped his arms around the man and made a fist against his upper abdomen. He thrust upward and out popped the food. Another life saved.

"I just did it and went back to eating," Heimlich said.

Heimlich said anyone could have done it. Indeed, the maneuver is easy enough for a child to perform. For example, Heimlich recently attended an awards dinner in Rosemont that honored a 10-year-old Cicero boy who used the maneuver to save his step-brother.

Fabian Marquez, who learned the maneuver in school, performed it on his stepbrother Raul Torres, who was choking on a piece of hard candy. "He saved my son's life," said Fabian's stepfather, Raul Torres.

While precise figures aren't available, the Heimlich maneuver likely has saved thousands. And now Heimlich's nonprofit Cincinnati-based Heimlich Institute is encouraging people to use the maneuver to prevent drownings and asthma attacks.

Heimlich recommends using the maneuver to purge water from the lungs of a potential drowning victim. He said if that doesn't work, a rescuer should proceed to CPR. However, the American Red Cross advises lifeguards to first try mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The lifeguard should use the Heimlich maneuver only if rescue breathing doesn't work, Red Cross said.

Heimlich's advice for asthma patients is even more controversial. He said the Heimlich maneuver expels air from the lungs. This carries away mucus plugs, clearing the airway and ending the asthma attack, Heimlich said.

The maneuver can even prevent asthma attacks, if done regularly, Heimlich said. He predicts asthma treatment will become the most common use of the maneuver.

However, the government's asthma treatment guidelines do not include the Heimlich maneuver, said Ron Burke of the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago. "As far as we know, the Heimlich maneuver for asthma has not been convincingly demonstrated to work," Burke said.

Heimlich, 81, was trained as a chest surgeon. He became an expert in swallowing problems after pioneering a new technique for esophagus surgery. Heimlich became interested in choking cases after reading a New York Times article about the high death toll from choking.

In a typical victim, food would become lodged in the windpipe. Unable to breathe or talk, the diner would die from what looked like a heart attack. It was dubbed a "cafe coronary."

At the time, the recommended treatment for choking was slapping the victim on the back. But this method, Heimlich said, made the problem worse by lodging the food deeper in the throat. "It was a horrible mistake," he said. "Thousands of people were dying who might not have died."

Heimlich invented a procedure that would compress the lungs. Air from the lungs would be exhaled in a burst, causing food to pop out like a cork from a champagne bottle.

After trying the method on four dogs--none of whom died--Heimlich published his maneuver in the journal Emergency Medicine in June 1974. The Chicago Daily News was the first newspaper to cover the story. Other newspapers picked it up, and within three months, Heimlich had received reports of at least 20 lives saved.

Heimlich called his technique "subdiaphragmatic pressure." Editors of the Journal of the American Medical Association gave it a catchier name, Heimlich maneuver. In 1985, U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop endorsed the Heimlich maneuver as the only method to treat choking.

Heimlich has traveled the world promoting his maneuver. On Sept. 29, he was in suburban Rosemont to speak at the Save a Life Foundation's awards dinner for Fabian and other heroes.

"People were surprised to know there is an actual Dr. Heimlich," said Mary Amirante, the foundation's special events director.

Heimlich was somewhat of a celebrity at the dinner. People asked for his autograph and posed with him for photographs. "Dr. Heimlich is a very eloquent person," Amirante said. "He speaks in terms you can understand."

Heimlich's knack for the common touch is what has made his technique so successful. "The Heimlich maneuver would not be very valuable if only a few people could do it," he said.

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