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CONTROVERSIAL MANEUVER

Heimlich's claim that his famous procedure can save near-drowning victims is disputed by many, including his own son

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 08/14/07

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Dr. Henry Heimlich has saved countless lives through the procedure that bears his name.

"It's an invaluable tool for choking victims," says Dr. Howard Rubenstein, the Emergency Care Center director at Riverview Medical Center in Red Bank.

"I've seen it save lives, going back to when I was an EMT," he says.

There's no dispute that since the time Dr. Henry Heimlich described the series of abdominal thrusts to dislodge an object from the throat in a 1974 article in the Journal of American Medicine, people have used the procedure to rescue those rendered helpless by an obstruction in their trachea.

"It's simple physics," says Rubenstein. "Exerting pressure upward from the diaphragm compresses the lungs and forces an object out."

One would think that such a simple, valuable procedure would not spark controversy, but it has and that controversy started with Heimlich himself, who has recommended the use of the procedure for near-drowning victims.

That makes no sense, according to Rubenstein.

"Typically, there is very little water in a drowning victim's lungs. The throat closes up before water gets into the lungs. Drowning victims usually die of asphyxiation not water in the lungs, so the Heimlich maneuver would be of no use and could actually do damage to the body," he says.

According to Rubenstein, Heimlich also has advocated his maneuver to help asthma victims and those with cystic fibrosis, although no reputable medical authorities believe it will help in those cases either.

"I respect Dr. Heimlich," says Rubenstein, "but I believe his claims for the maneuver beyond aiding choking victims are simply overreaching."

So does the Red Cross.

In fact, according to Leo Pratte, Director of Disaster Services for the Jersey Coast Chapter of the American Red Cross, the Red Cross has not referred to abdominal thrusts as the Heimlich Maneuver for years.

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"It is a legal issue," Pratte says. "We'd owe Heimlich money for calling it that."

When it comes to aiding a choking victim, he says, the Red Cross counsels the following course of action:

Give five back blows and if the object is not forced out, then give five quick upward abdominal thrusts. Continue sets of back blows and abdominal thrusts until object is forced out, the person can breathe or cough forcefully. If the person becomes unconscious, perform CPR. Between giving 30 compressions and two breaths look for an object and remove it if one is seen.

Pratte points out that if a choking victim falls to the floor, he or she should be considered unconscious, even if awake.

The issue of giving near-drowning victims abdominal thrusts is still a matter of some controversy.

"Research continues," Pratte says. "but none of the major organizations (that) train lifeguards, including the Boy Scouts, the YMCA and the Red Cross recommend using abdominal thrusts. Even if the victim has water in the lungs, there's no way of knowing how little or how much, and time spent doing that is time not spent on CPR, including chest compressions, which will accomplish the same thing."

Heimlich's son, Peter, has long been waging a campaign against his father's insistence that the maneuver has uses apart from aiding choking victims.

"The maneuver for drowning is a bizarre 30-year scam that had deadly consequences. His only evidence was a handful of cases in which drowning victims were allegedly saved by the maneuver. Our research uncovered that the cases are dubious at best, fraud at worst. When doctors have asked my father to provide details, he comes up empty" says Peter Heimlich. "Except for the maneuver for choking, all of my father's theories have been thoroughly discredited as useless and dangerous."

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