

Physicians say story unfairly portrayed Heimlich's work

This week, (April 14-18), the nation is celebrating the contributions of a man who, as Norman Vincent Peale said, "has saved the lives of more human beings than any other person living today." That man is Dr. Henry Heimlich. And rather than celebrating the man who developed the Heimlich Maneuver and revolutionized the treatment of choking and near-drowning victims, *The Cincinnati Enquirer* has attempted to discredit him.

This is unfortunate. This is irresponsible. This is wrong.

Dr. Heimlich has dedicated his life to researching and treating some of the world's biggest medical problems. From helping victims of chest trauma to working to boost immune systems in the fight against AIDS, Dr. Heimlich has been at the forefront of medical research and treatment. He has chosen to make Cincinnati his home, and we are better for it.

On March 16, however, the *Enquirer* ran a front-page story disparaging Dr. Heimlich. Titled "Heimlich falsely claims he invented surgical procedure," the article by Robert Anglen stated that Dr. Heimlich did not properly credit a Romanian doctor for his role in developing an innovative operation. In reality, Dr. Heimlich has consistently given credit to Dr. Dan Gavrilu. Not just once, but many times over the course of several decades.

First, a little background: Dr. Heimlich and a colleague, Dr. James M. Winfield, in the medical journal *Surgery* in 1955, outlined a technique they had developed to replace or bypass the esophagus. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Gavrilu wrote to them that he had performed the same surgery successfully in Romania since 1951. While Romanian scientific journals had published this news, those journals had not been available in the U.S. given the Cold War climate.

Upon hearing from Dr. Gavrilu, Dr. Heimlich promptly credited Dr. Gavrilu with performing

the surgery first. He even submitted a report on the procedure to a U.S. scientific journal so that "the procedure may become known to American surgeons and that Dr. Dan Gavrilu be given priority." In the same article in the journal *Surgery*, October 1957, Dr. Heimlich went on to say that Dr. Gavrilu first successfully performed the surgery in April 1951.

Dr. Heimlich continued to point out, on his own accord, that Dr. Gavrilu was first:

■ An article for the International Society of Surgery Conference in 1957 - carrying the names of both Dr. Gavrilu and Dr. Heimlich - reported: "A procedure for replacing the esophagus by means of a reversed gastric tube created from the greater curvature of the stomach was described by Heimlich and Winfield in April 1955. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Dan Gavrilu of Bucharest, Romania, wrote the authors stating that the operation they had performed experimentally had been successfully performed since 1951."

■ In an article in the *American Medical Association's Archives of Otolaryngology* in May 1959, Dr. Heimlich again credited Dr. Gavrilu. "I described the reversed gastric tube operation in 1955, and, subsequently, was informed by Dr. Dan Gavrilu of Bucharest, Romania, that he had been performing this operation since 1951."

■ In a 1972 article in *The American Journal of Surgery*, Dr. Heimlich again clearly credited Dr. Gavrilu with primacy.

■ In the *Annals of Surgery* in 1975, Dr. Heimlich wrote: "For ten years prior to 1955, the Iron Curtain prevented exchange of scientific information between Eastern Europe and the West. Gavrilu and Gorgeson in Romania, also in 1955, informed me, after reading my paper, that they had independently described the RGT operation. Their contribution was then made known to the West in a report by

me."

Clearly, Dr. Heimlich was not improperly assuming credit for the procedure. On the contrary, he worked diligently to ensure that the medical community knew that Dr. Gavrilu was a pioneer.

Dr. Heimlich also is a pioneer. Time and again he has bucked conventional wisdom and eventually been proven right. The Heimlich Maneuver - a technique for saving victims of choking and near-drownings - was controversial for many years. Yet Dr. Heimlich prevailed, and today thousands of lives around the world have been saved because of this simple, effective emergency procedure.

April 14 is the start of National Heimlich Maneuver Week, a time to educate people about the technique. It also is an opportunity to educate people about the contributions, the legacy and the integrity of its inventor, Dr. Henry Heimlich.

As medical professionals, we are writing to establish clearly that we find Mr. Anglen's article highly inaccurate and distorted. Dr. Heimlich is a caring, committed and courageous humanitarian. He deserves to be treated with respect.

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