

Life-savers press their case

CPR advocates say Heimlich creator is causing dangerous indecision on which technique to use on near-drowning victims.

By **MAYRAV SAAR**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER, JUNE 15, 2004

Lifeguards thought they were past all this. But just as summer invariably brings sun burns and fireworks accidents, it also brings The Question.

Is the Heimlich maneuver a better approach to saving near-drowning victims than CPR?

To the medical establishment, the answer is simple: No. Medical studies have found that cardiopulmonary resuscitation is far more effective than the Heimlich maneuver in forcing air into the lungs of people who have stopped breathing.

But every year, at every training session or conference, there are always a few lifeguards who say they've heard the Heimlich is a better approach - one that they'd prefer to try should they pluck a victim from the water.

Practicing the Heimlich instead of CPR goes against protocol for Orange County lifeguards, and down the county's 41 miles of coastline this weekend, lifeguards were recertified in CPR. But officials said there are those all over the country who still consider doing it. The reason for this disparity: Dr. Henry J. Heimlich.

The 84-year-old Cincinnati doctor who invented a simple technique to save people from choking to death is a persuasive communicator. For the past 15 years, Heimlich has promoted the use of his namesake maneuver to resuscitate people who have nearly drowned.

To the people who save lives for a living, Heimlich is pushing a dangerous agenda. One that could kill.

"What he's saying to do would delay CPR. You're not getting air into the lungs. You're absolutely wasting time," said Dr. Peter Wernicki, medical director for the International Lifesaving Federation.

It is CPR, with its inability to expel water from the lungs, that is the true waste of time, Heimlich says.

CLEARING THE LUNGS

Reached at his home in Cincinnati, Heimlich declined to be interviewed for this story, but Bob Kraft, a spokesman for the Heimlich Institute, said a person who is near drowning suffers the same crisis as someone choking on a piece of steak: something is blocking his airway.

"Survival from drowning depends primarily on how much water is inhaled and how long the patient hasn't been breathing," Kraft said. "The question should be 'What can we do to save more of these victims?' The Heimlich maneuver is an option that should be looked at."

It has been looked at, but both sides say the issue has not been studied thoroughly enough. Until it is better researched, the American Heart Association and the American Red Cross said they will recommend using the Heimlich maneuver only if a solid object is blocking attempts at CPR.

Still, nearly two decades of the doctor's assertions have kept the debate alive among lifeguards. His promotion has brought the method out of the lifeguard towers and onto the shorelines and pool sides.

NO TIME TO DEBATE

On Saturday, Marques Fuller, an 8-year-old Florida boy, drowned at a public pool across the street from his house. A pool lifeguard had been performing CPR on the boy, when Marques' grandmother interrupted to try the Heimlich maneuver.

"I'm sure that she was desperate," said officer Renee Morris, spokeswoman for the St. Augustine, Fla., Police Department. "I know the Heimlich maneuver is used to get things out of the throat; I guess that's what she was trying to do. I've never heard of anyone doing the Heimlich maneuver with a drowned person."

When fire authorities arrived, they resumed CPR, but the boy did not survive. It is unclear whether anything could have saved him, and the case is being investigated, police said.

"The bottom line is we lost a child, no matter what the reports are going to say," Morris said. "I don't believe there was any negligence. It seems to me that grandma did what she thought she needed to do."

That's the problem with the whole nature of the debate, both sides say: The urgency of drowning means a rescuer does not have the luxury to weigh options and consider risk. This is why local lifeguards are trained in one technique – and why Heimlich and his supporters believe they should be trained in another.

LIFEGUARDS AND HEIMLICH

One of the lifeguards who endorsed Heimlich's approach is a former vice president of the United States Lifesaving Association, a Huntington Beach-based organization that is part of the federation. This infuriates current USLA President B. Chris Brewster.

"We are ethically bound to perform CPR only in the manner in which we were taught," he said. "There is a potential that people may be dying."

Heimlich's spokesman dismisses this assertion, saying the doctor has been personally targeted by naysayers who want to sully his famous name. None of the local lifeguards interviewed for this story said they use the Heimlich maneuver instead of CPR, but Brewster and others said the issue comes up at nearly every convention and seminar they attend.

"I was getting my EMT refresher course with half the full-time lifeguard force in San Diego, and one of the students asked the instructor about it. The instructor who is a paramedic said, 'That sounds logical,' " Brewster said. "A number of lifeguards were saying, 'That's what I plan to do.' "

CONTACT US: (714) 796-6880 or msaar@ocregister.com

Orange County Register - Tuesday, June, 15, 2004

Some question doctor's practices

Background of Henry J. Heimlich.

Dr. Henry J. Heimlich's very name is associated with goodwill.

The Cincinnati doctor's 30-year-old namesake move has been credited with saving 50,000 people from choking to death, the Heimlich Institute in Ohio says.

But Heimlich's reputation as a researcher has become tarnished in recent years. The medical community has been questioning some of his more recent ideas, including using a technique to battle AIDS in Africa and promoting the use of the Heimlich maneuver to save near-drowning victims.

Heimlich's Web site lists several accomplishments that were, at first, deemed bizarre.

"While assigned to a U.S. Naval Group in China during World War II, Dr. Heimlich took a chance with an innovative treatment for victims of trachoma, an incurable bacterial infection of the eyelids that was causing blindness throughout Asia and the Middle East. A mixture of sulfadiazine ground into a base of shaving cream proved effective, and the staff used the treatment successfully on hundreds of people," a biography on his Web site says.

In 2003, the New York Times reported that Heimlich promoted research in China from 1993 to 1996 that involved injecting HIV patients with malaria in an attempt to kill the AIDS virus.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention opposes malarial therapy.