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Heimlich family divided over doctor's reputation

The Heimlich maneuver made its namesake famous. His son says the fame is undeserved, even dangerous.

By [Kim Ode](#), Star Tribune

The American Red Cross last spring made a subtle change in its instructions for helping someone who is choking. Instead of specifying the Heimlich maneuver, it urged rescuers to do "five-and-five." That's five sharp back blows between the shoulder blades followed, if necessary, by five quick abdominal thrusts.

The Heimlich maneuver *is* an abdominal thrust, so the change was mostly semantic and likely would have gone unnoticed but for Peter Heimlich, son of the famous doctor, Henry Heimlich.

For Peter, who has a last name so famous that it's in the dictionary, the shift signaled success in his efforts to reveal what he calls his father's "remarkable history of malfeasance and ethical misconduct." "No matter how many choking victims have been saved by the maneuver, that doesn't give him the right to promote useless, dangerous medical theories," Peter Heimlich said.

The issue isn't whether the Heimlich maneuver helps someone who's choking. It does. The controversy came when the doctor touted it as the best rescue method for drowning -- a contention that was once accepted, but recently the maneuver was rejected as "potentially dangerous" by the American Heart Association.

Henry Heimlich, who is 86, is retired and lives in Cincinnati. A woman at his home referred calls to publicist Robert Kraft, who said that Heimlich regards this as "a personal and private matter, and a personal tragedy that his son is estranged, and he's not going to comment on any of it."

Kraft, however, had some comments. Add in voluminous e-mails from Peter Heimlich, a list of rescued celebrities and the use of film-noir pseudonyms, and you have a bewildering tale of how health policy -- and pop icons -- are made.

The hug of life

In 1974, Henry Heimlich showed the world how to hug a choking victim from behind, placing your fist against their abdomen, then pressing it to make a quick upward thrust, using the force of air to expel the blockage.

Like CPR or Popsicle-stick splints, this is basic first aid. So how did the maneuver rise (or fall) to the level of a punch line of "Saturday Night Live" skits? One clue may be the Heimlich Institute's website, which lists celebrities saved by the action: Cher, Ronald Reagan, Goldie Hawn, Elizabeth Taylor, among others. A favorite "Tonight Show" clip shows Johnny Carson demonstrating the then-new maneuver on then-starlet Loni Anderson, with expectedly bawdy results.

Yet some people have never heard of the maneuver. So to convey the best information most quickly, the Red Cross dropped the reference to "Heimlich" in favor of "abdominal thrusts." "It's the same technique," said Mary Barber-Schmitz, health and safety program senior coordinator for the Twin Cities Chapter of the American Red Cross. The term abdominal thrusts "is more descriptive of the action instead of some named technique." One technique isn't demonstrably better than another, she said, "but the evidence suggests that there's more success if you're using more than one technique."

And the recommendation to begin with back blows? "We had to say something, otherwise people would stand around forever trying to decide what to do," Barber-Schmitz said.

Booster or bully?

Peter Heimlich, who lives in Idaho, began researching his father's career five years ago "and to my astonishment, I turned up a remarkable history of malfeasance and ethical misconduct," he said.

The son has no quarrel with the Heimlich maneuver's effectiveness when used for choking, but with how his father badmouthed other methods. "He tried to ruin the careers and reputations of other doctors, simply because they disagreed with him," the younger Heimlich said. Health organizations who once OK'd the maneuver for drowning victims now have made an about-face. The American Heart Association, in its journal, *Circulation*, said that the Heimlich maneuver for drowning situations is "unnecessary and potentially dangerous" and is "not recommended."

So how does such a turnabout happen?

"It became clear to some people if you messed with Heimlich, he would make your life miserable," said Robert Baratz, president of the National Council Against Health Fraud, a private organization in Massachusetts, and a frequent critic of alternative medical practices. "To mollify him, people said you could do both [Heimlich and back blows.]" But Henry Heimlich wanted his method to be the only method.

Peter Heimlich provided copies of letters among doctors, some of them published in industry journals in the mid-1980s, that showed the tension around his father's boosterism and his flaying of those who

disagreed. Efforts to get comment from doctors of that era proved difficult. Typical was one from the Mayo Clinic, who said that the doctor has moved on and wouldn't care to comment.

Since the Heimlich's heyday, the luster of the famous name faded as the doctor extended his reach into drowning rescue to promoting his maneuver to deal with asthma attacks and to other ventures (including touting that AIDS can be cured by injecting people with malaria). Each cause has drawn fire from the medical establishment.

"He's not a factor any longer," Baratz said.

Unflattering investigations

Kraft, a senior counselor at Dan Pinger Public Relations Inc. in Cincinnati, disagreed, with qualifications. On drowning, he allowed as how the elder Heimlich is "pretty much all alone out there," although noting that a lifesaving organization used the method for several years "without the wide-scale death and destruction that Peter claims."

Actually, Kraft and Peter Heimlich agree on several points. Both say that Peter is estranged from the rest of the Heimlich family, that his efforts have become a full-time cause and that Peter used pseudonyms from old films such as Holly Martins ("The Third Man") and Barton Keyes ("Double Indemnity") to disguise his identity. Peter defended that as the only means of getting information from people harmed by his father who would have refused to talk to a Heimlich.

Kraft said that Peter Heimlich's website, www.medfraud.info, used to be more "vitriolic," but now has an air of smugness, "with him posting stories like scalps and trophies," he said.

The stories are there to post. There are links to recent unflattering investigative reports about the senior Heimlich from mainstream news outlets in Ohio and Chicago.

Peter Heimlich acknowledges that the spectacle of a cultural icon being taken down by his son is an attention-grabber, even as he maintains that he's serving science more than his own agenda.

"Why have I spoken out? Shouldn't the question be, why hasn't the medical profession spoken out more forcefully?" he asked. He said he hears from people around the country who "know it wasn't easy. But I wasn't going to turn a blind eye. So I spoke up."

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