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# Heimlich debate grows

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RYE BROOK — The sun was setting and dusk would quickly become darkness that cloudy evening in Rye Brook. Richard Keller was eating dinner with his parents. Next door, then-2-year-old Alexa Dayan was playing poolside with family and friends. It was Father's Day 1998.

The emotional pendulum for all during the next few minutes, according to a police report, must have careened from horror to dread to sweet relief. In that immeasurable moment, where toddlers can overstep their limits, Alexa ended up on the pool's bottom. Events credited with saving her life are today tangled in a life-and-death controversy.

"It was like a slow-motion picture," Keller, a 41-year-old former lifeguard, recalled last month.

"It was a little bit surreal. She was pretty blue, almost like navy blue," he added. "I was just doing all the things you were trained to do."

The dispute centers around one of the most well-known medical names in America and his eponymous maneuver — a technique registered as a trademark and illustrated on restaurant walls. The Heimlich maneuver was even part of an episode of Fox-TV's "The Simpsons," a measure of cultural acceptance if ever there was one.

That iconic status, critics contend, is endangering the public. Long accepted as a choking rescue, Dr. Henry J. Heimlich, 85, and a former Rye resident, has for years campaigned to have his technique recognized as the first response for near-drowning victims. But his theory — drowning victims die when water fills their lungs and air cannot enter — is dismissed by most of the emergency medicine field, including the national water rescue association, the American Heart Association and the American Red Cross.

A Cincinnati resident, Heimlich maintains his technique stands between life and death for 1,000 people every year. The debate — to Heimlich or not for drowning victims — has simmered for several years in medical conference proceedings and professional rescue discussions.

"In clearing the airway prior to CPR, do not perform the Heimlich maneuver! The Heimlich maneuver has no role in drowning resuscitation, unless a solid foreign body obstructs the airway (this does not mean water or vomit) and ventilation is otherwise

impossible," according to the U.S. Public Health and Human Services publication, "The Ship's Medicine Chest and Medical Aid at Sea," which is used by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Arguments have spilled into public view recently, driven in part by a Web site maintained by Heimlich's son, Peter. The younger Heimlich has amassed dozens of letters, scientific reports and newspaper articles aimed at debunking the drowning angle. This, he said in an e-mail, has nothing to do with the maneuver for choking, "which obviously works and has saved many lives."

"This is about applying the Heimlich maneuver where it doesn't belong, to drowning rescue," wrote Peter Heimlich, a 51-year-old fabric designer and importer living outside New Orleans. "Three years ago, I started looking at my father's career. I discovered problems with the drowning rescue cases he's been touting. There is no clinical research that backs up his claims."

Reviving a near-drowning victim depends on ventilating, or getting air to the victim, as quickly as possible through cardiopulmonary resuscitation, the anti-Heimlich side maintains. The body's physiology supports that approach, according to medical experts, who say administering the Heimlich on a near-drowning victim wastes precious seconds, can rupture organs or cause vomiting, which could go back down into the lungs — all potentially life-threatening complications.

"The Heimlich Maneuver for choking? Wonderful," said Dr. Peter Wernicki, the Florida-based medical adviser to the United States Lifesaving Association for two decades. "Because of that, he has tried to take it one step further. They (the lungs) don't usually fill up with a significant amount of water. It has been proven that even if they do, air can still be gotten in."

But on June 21, 1998, only the result mattered. Just before 8:30 p.m., Alexa somehow slipped into the pool. Other children yelling alerted nearby adults at the barbecue, including parents Betty and Richard Dayan, according to a police report. Her mother jumped in and pulled her out. Keller said he ran over, grabbed the unconscious child and did "a couple of quick thrusts."

"There was water coming up," Keller said. "I'm convinced in that case, at least, getting the water out was what enabled me to get my breath into her."

A lifeguard in the early 1980s, Keller doesn't remember where he learned to apply the Heimlich in a drowning situation. He acknowledged it wasn't included in his Red Cross lifeguard classes. Like the Red Cross, the American Heart Association points rescuers away from the maneuver.

"Do not routinely perform the Heimlich maneuver for resuscitation of submersion victims. It delays the initiation of ventilation and produces complications. ... Use the Heimlich maneuver only if the rescuer suspects foreign-body airway obstruction," according to the association's guidelines.

Dr. Robert Baratz, a Massachusetts internist and president of the National Council Against Health Fraud, in an e-mail said Heimlich's drowning theories are "all wet."

"Individuals who drown have spasm of the vocal folds and very little water in their lungs," Baratz explained. "They usually swallow lots of water as they struggle. Water is swallowed as a reflex to keep it from the lungs. Thus, doing abdominal thrusts to push water from the lungs makes no sense physiologically."

For Betty Dayan, the dispute is irrelevant. Alexa, she said, is a "beautiful, brilliant" 10-year-old who plays soccer.

"They should get over it already," Dayan said. "We're living fact. That's the proof."

Heimlich didn't return telephone messages left at his home. But his spokesman, Bob Kraft, said the doctor is aware of the controversy. Advocating an unorthodox method is how medicine proceeds, Kraft said.

"He's willing to have that debate," Kraft said. "He's convinced the Heimlich maneuver is the best theory for drowning."

Kraft said the accusations by Peter Heimlich, who is estranged from the family, sadden his father.

"It's part of a hate campaign," Kraft said.

The younger Heimlich disagreed with Kraft's assertion.

"I don't hate my father. On the contrary, I believe that if you love someone, you don't allow them to hurt themselves or to hurt others," Peter Heimlich said.

This April, Dr. Heimlich spoke at a conference sponsored by the Illinois-based Save A Life Foundation, which aims to train the public in basic lifesaving skills. Heimlich asked the attendees, "What will it take to get the word out about this?," a reference to using the maneuver for near-drowning rescues, according to a summary on the group's Web site.

A spokeswoman for the foundation, of which Heimlich is a founding board member, declined to talk about the drowning aspect.

The summary mentions a Web site for more information, which turns out to be Peter Heimlich's "Drowning in Lies" site. That is apparently a typographical error, substituting [www.heimlichinstitute.com](http://www.heimlichinstitute.com) for Dr. Heimlich's [www.heimlichinstitute.org](http://www.heimlichinstitute.org).

What Heimlich has, his opponents point out, is his name and a history of fighting the medical establishment. Not until 1985, when then-Surgeon General C. Everett Koop endorsed the maneuver for choking, did it become an accepted method.

"Having it pooh-pooed at first (for choking), having authoritative bodies reject it, that only added to his reputation," said B. Chris Brewster, who was a City of San Diego lifeguard for 22 years — 13 years as chief lifeguard — and has been president of the United States Lifesaving Association for 15 years.

Dr. David Goldwag, Westchester Medical Center's emergency medicine chief, said he's probably dealt with 20 near-drowning victims in two decades of medicine.

"The current thinking and the current teaching is it's not a water intoxication, a water-logging of the lungs," he said. "I've never had a paramedic tell me they couldn't blow air into (someone's) lungs."

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