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Heimlich may discuss malaria therapy for AIDS

By ANITA WADHWANI
Staff Writer

He's known to the public for the life-saving maneuver that helps choking victims, but among some in the medical community, Dr. Henry Heimlich has become an increasingly controversial figure for his theories on injecting AIDS and HIV patients with malaria.

In fact, his ideas are so controversial that it was difficult to get a straight answer yesterday about whether Heimlich would still present new findings from studies on so-called "malariotherapy" at 11 a.m. today, as scheduled, at an international AIDS conference in Nashville.

Questions about his appearance arose after a reporter's inquiries. A woman who answered the telephone at Heimlich's Cincinnati home yesterday wouldn't comment, and Heimlich couldn't be reached. However, just before stepping on stage yesterday afternoon at PanAfrica Conference 2004, organizer Leonard Madu responded that Heimlich would be appearing.

Critics of Heimlich's theories, such as physician Robert Baratz, call the idea of infecting those with HIV and AIDS with another potentially deadly disease "worse than snake oil," a practice that could kill instead of cure. Baratz is president of the National Council Against Health Fraud, a medical watchdog group in Peabody, Mass.

But Heimlich, 84, said earlier this week that he's no stranger to creative new ideas in medicine being dismissed by the establishment — just as his maneuver was once dismissed by the mainstream medical community, which, he said, advocated backslapping choking victims instead.

"I think there is always criticism of something new, OK?" Heimlich said. "There is a French philosopher who said, 'On every causeway on the road to the future, the progressive spirit is opposed by 1,000 men appointed to guard the past.' I have a saying, too, which is: If all your peers understand what you've done, you haven't been creative."

The organizer of the conference at the Millennium Maxwell House Hotel for doctors, activists, faith-based workers and others says he does not take a position on Heimlich's theories. The conference, in its 11th year, is devoted to a free flow of ideas about a disease. And no one ought to be censored because no one has found a cure, said organizer Madu.

Heimlich has been promoting the idea of using malaria to treat HIV and AIDS for more than two decades, according to published reports.

Here's how it works, according to Heimlich: Inject someone who has HIV or AIDS with a curable strain of malaria. The high fever and other immune-boosting responses that

accompany the disease help strengthen the immune system to withstand the onslaught of HIV and AIDS. Cure the malaria and you have a stronger person, he said. Heimlich doesn't know if it's a cure, but it's certainly promising enough to research further, he said.

Such research is illegal in the United States, according to Baratz, a specialist in internal medicine who is on the faculty of the Boston University School of Medicine.

Baratz likened malariotherapy to Nazi-era medical atrocities and the condemned Tuskegee experiment in which healthy African-American men were deliberately infected with syphilis.

In 2000, the FDA ordered Heimlich's organization, the Cincinnati-based Heimlich Institute, to end malariotherapy experiments being conducted on patients in China, according to published reports.

A University of California at Los Angeles AIDS researcher was censured for his participation in that experiment, but because Heimlich does not receive federal funds, he was not censured, according to Baratz.

Heimlich also has been criticized for other controversial theories, such as promoting the use of the Heimlich maneuver for asthma attacks and drowning victims.

The PanAfrica Conference draws about 300 to 500 participants internationally each year to talk about strategies for stopping the spread of the disease among blacks in the United States, Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere. This year, the conference also will look at the rising rates of infection among Hispanics, Madu said.

Madu said he was aware of the controversy around Heimlich's presentation, titled "Treating HIV by Strengthening the Immune System." However, he said he believed in freedom of speech at the conference.

"There is no cure by having a monopoly of ideas," Madu said.

If you go

What: The PanAfrica Conference 2004

When: Today and tomorrow

Where: Millennium Maxwell House Hotel, 2025 MetroCenter Blvd.

For more info: For registration information, call 253-1391.

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