

Woman chokes and Dr. Heimlich is at the table



Dr. Henry Heimlich, 96, used the life-saving technique he invented on Patty Ris, 87, who began choking at the senior residence community in Cincinnati where they both live.

By Christine Hauser BOSTONGLOBE.COM MAY 27, 2016

NEW YORK — Since he invented the Heimlich maneuver more than four decades ago, Dr. Henry J. Heimlich said he had demonstrated the lifesaving technique only on people willing to play the role of a choking victim.

But this week, Heimlich, 96, finally got to do the real thing.

Heimlich used the abdomen-squeezing maneuver Monday night on a woman who was choking at their senior residence community in Cincinnati, popping a morsel of meat out of her mouth.

“I felt it was just confirmation of what I had been doing throughout my life,” he said in an interview Friday.

The 87-year-old woman, Patty Ris, had sat down by chance at Heimlich’s table in the dining hall of Deupree House . She ordered an open-faced hamburger and began to eat. He said he turned to his left to initiate conversation.

“I saw her face was all stiffened up and her skin was turning dark and she could not speak,” Heimlich said. “Of all things, I knew she was choking.”

At that moment, four decades of role-playing turned into a life-or-death performance for Heimlich, who developed the technique in 1974.

He said he stood up and moved behind Ris’s chair, turning her slightly so her back was facing him across the arm rest.

“I made a fist of my right hand — you can do it with either hand, by the way — and put my arms around her,” he said.

He placed the thumb side of his fist just above her belly button and below the chest to compress the air in her lungs. “I did it three times, and it apparently was pretty much done on the first time,” he said.

“A piece of meat with a little bone attached flew out of her mouth.”

Color returned to her face. “I knew I had saved her,” he said.

Heimlich, a thoracic surgeon, began researching ways to use pressure on the diaphragm to save victims of choking in the early 1970s, after he learned that nearly 4,000 Americans died each year from choking on food or small objects.

In 1974, he developed the method that compresses the lungs, causing a flow of air that carries the stuck object out of the airway and then the mouth. It became associated with his name, and nearly ubiquitous with how-to references for saving people.

Many restaurants display posters with cartoon characters demonstrating the technique. A campaign known as Heimlich Heroes raises awareness among children. Heimlich's website lists celebrities who have been the recipients of the maneuver, among them President Ronald Reagan, Elizabeth Taylor, and Mayor Edward I. Koch of New York.

Heimlich's lifesaving move came to light this week when an interview about the event was recorded by a public relations team working for Episcopal Retirement Services, the parent company of the residence, and distributed to local news media.

Bryan Reynolds, a spokesman for Episcopal Retirement Services, said Heimlich had lived at Deupree for six years. "He is very active; he goes swimming quite a bit," Reynolds said.

Ris, who is new to Deupree, said she did not yet have a favorite seat in the dining room. She said it was just by coincidence that she ended up next to Heimlich that night.

"I just sat down at a table," she says in the video provided by Reynolds. "I ordered a hamburger, and the next thing I know, I could not breathe I was choking so hard."

She wrote Heimlich a thank-you note. "I said, 'God put me in this seat next to you,' " she said.

Heimlich said that even though over the years he had never performed the maneuver on an actual choking victim, he had been confident that it would work when he helped Ris.

"I was very sure of it," he said, "because I know there are tens of thousands of people that the Heimlich maneuver had saved."

Choking is the fifth leading cause of accidental death in the United States.

Heimlich said after the episode at the senior residence, everyone at the table went back to eating, but he soon saw Ris again. "The next day she saw me and sat down next to me," he said.

