

A Doctor Must Go to Extremes to Save a Choking Victim

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Emergencies happen anywhere, anytime, and sometimes physicians find themselves in situations where they are the only ones who can help.

... Some time ago I was invited to join a bipartisan congressional task force... The whole thing was a resounding success. Francis Collins was there, the just-retired director of the NIH. Tom Frieden, then-director of the CDC was there,

Afterward, we had a banquet dinner at a restaurant in downtown Bakersfield. One of the people there was a woman I knew well — her husband was a physician friend. The restaurant served steak and salmon, and this woman made the mistake of ordering the steak.

Not long after the entrees were served, I heard a commotion at the table just behind me. I turned around and saw that woman in distress. A piece of steak had wedged in her trachea and she couldn't breathe.

Almost immediately, the chef showed up. I don't know how he got there. The chef at this restaurant was a big guy. I mean, probably 6 feet, 5 inches tall and 275 pounds. He tried the Heimlich maneuver. It didn't work.

At that point, I jumped up. I thought: Well, maybe I know how to do this better than him. Probably not, actually. I tried and couldn't make it work either. So I knew we were going to have to do something.

Paul Krogstad, my friend and research partner who is a pediatric infectious disease physician, stepped up and tried to put his finger in her throat and dig it out. He couldn't get it. The patient had lost consciousness.

So, I'm thinking, okay, there's really only one choice. You have to get an airway surgically.

I said, "We have to put her down on the floor." And then I said, "knife!"

I was looking at the steak knives on the table and they weren't to my liking for doing a procedure. My college roommate — the retired Navy man — whipped out this very good pocketknife.

So, there we were, I had Paul Krogstad holding her head, and CDC Director Tom Frieden taking her pulse, which she still had. I took the knife and did a [cricothyroidotomy](#). I had never done this in my life.

While I was making the incision, somebody gave Paul a ballpoint pen and he broke it into pieces to make a [tracheostomy](#) tube. Once I'd made the little incision, I put the tube in. She wasn't breathing, but she still had a pulse.

I leaned forward and blew into the tube and inflated her lungs. I could see her lungs balloon up. It was a nice feeling, because I knew I was clearly in the right place.

I can't quite explain it, but while I was doing this, I was enormously calm and totally focused. I knew there was a crowd of people around me, all looking at me, but I wasn't conscious of that.

It was really just the four of us: Paul and Tom and me and our patient. Those were the only people that I was really cognizant of. Paul and Tom were not panic stricken at all. I remember somebody shouting, "We have to start CPR!" And Frieden said, "No. We don't."

Moments later, she woke up, sat up, coughed, and shot the piece of steak across the room.

She was breathing on her own, but we still taped that tube into place. Somebody had already summoned an ambulance; they were there not very long after we completed this procedure. I got in the ambulance with her and we rode over to the emergency room at Mercy Truxtun.

She was stable and doing okay. I sat with her until a thoracic surgeon showed up. He checked out the situation and decided we didn't need that tube and took it out. I didn't want to take that out until I had a surgeon there who could do a formal tracheostomy.

They kept her in the hospital for 3 or 4 days. Now, this woman had always had difficulties swallowing, so steak may not have been the best choice. She still had trouble swallowing afterward but recovered.

I've known her and her husband a long time, so it was certainly rewarding to be able to provide this service. Years later, though, when her husband died, I spoke at his funeral. When she was speaking to the gathering, she said, "And oh, by the way, Royce, thanks for saving my life."

That surprised me. I didn't think we were going to go there.

I'd never tried to practice medicine "at the roadside" before. But that's part of the career.

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