

# HENRY ROBERT SILVESTER

## AND HIS METHOD OF ARTIFICIAL RESPIRATION

Henry Silvester was born in London in 1829 and studied medicine at King's College, London. He gained qualifications as a Surgeon (in 1853) and he also earned a Doctorate in Medicine from the University of London. He worked at King's College Hospital and the Clapham General Dispensary as a physician.

Dr Silvester successfully resuscitated a patient by lying the patient on his back and passively moving the patient's arms to alternately press down on the chest (causing inspiration) and then extend the arms above the patient's head (causing slight inspiration). Silvester published this form of resuscitation in the *British Medical Journal* in 1859.

The very first manual on first aid written for St John Ambulance by Surgeon-Major Peter Shepherd was titled *Handbook describing Aids for Cases of Injuries or Sudden Illness*. The manual first was published in 1878. It contains dramatic illustrations of resuscitation in rough seas using the Silvester method.

The main criticism of the Silvester method was that the patient was on his back and his tongue kept obeying gravity and hence tended to block the airway. Despite this criticism, the Silvester method of artificial respiration was still advocated in the Australian St John First Aid manual published in 1972, ninety four years since Peter Shepherd published the method in 1878.

Dr Silvester received the prestigious Fothergillian Medal from the Royal Humane Society in 1883. Only three examples of this medal were ever issued in gold, and Henry Silvester received the last of those three. The image is that of a child blowing life into the dying embers of a torch. The inscription *LATEAT SCINTILLVLA FORSAN* is the motto of the Royal Humane Society and means "Peradventure a little spark may yet lay hid".

Henry Robert Silvester died in March 1908, but his method of resuscitation continued on in St John Ambulance publications until at least 1972.

The Silvester method is no longer taught as it was far less effective than the mouth-to-mouth technique introduced by Dr Peter Safar in the late 1950s.

Question: The Silvester Method of artificial respiration required that the patient be lying face upwards. The next major advance in resuscitation had the patient lying face down. Who introduced this change?

Answer to last question: The Governor-General who visited the Hindmarsh Ambulance Centre in 1959 was Sir William Slim.



The St John Ambulance  
**Historical Society**  
of South Australia

## HISTORICAL HAPPENINGS



Fothergillian Medal



### Brian Fotheringham

Chairman of the St John Ambulance Historical Society in SA