Physician's Lexicon

Ten You Can Count On

As unlikely as it may seem, the digital examination and the digital computer share a linguistic ancestor: *digitus*, the Latin word for finger. It is the descendent of an Indo-European root meaning 'to show', from which we also get such words as indicate and index. Time and technology have obscured the ancestral line from the ten fingers to the decimal counting system and ultimately to the ones and zeros forming a binary number, which employs only one of the nine Arabic numerals but is nevertheless said to comprise a series of digits. The word, finger, comes from a root meaning five, which also begat *penta* in Greek and *quintus* in Latin.

Students of anatomy know the little finger as *digitus quintus*, but tradition has given to the fingers names richer in meaning than their numerical designations. The little finger was known to the Romans as the auricular finger because of its utility in cleaning the ear. In Old English it is the *earclænsend* finger. The Dutch word for this finger, *pinkje*, found its way into the Scottish dialect as pinkie, a term used to indicate something very small.

A Roman belief held that the heart receives blood directly from a *vena amoris* arising from the fourth finger on which one traditionally places a wedding band. In his *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville observes that physicians use this ring finger or gold finger to apply salves, hence *digitus medicinalis* or, in Old English, *læce* or leech finger.
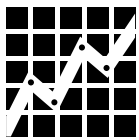
The middle finger, the *digitus summus* or tallest finger in Latin, has acquired a colorful reputation from its use in gestures of derision, hence the nickname *digitus impudicus*, the shameless finger. Borrowed by the Anglo-Saxons, the name appears in Old English as the *æwiscberend* finger, the shame-bearer.

The index finger; so named from its use in pointing (*L. indicare*), is the *scytefinger* or shooting finger in Old English, presumably from its role in pulling the bow-string. The name might well apply today when the fingers form a make-believe pistol with the *scytefinger* extended.

The word, thumb, can be traced to an Indoeuropean root meaning 'to swell', from which we also get thigh, tumor, and thousand. The Romans called it *digitus pollex*, the powerful finger (from *pollere*, to be powerful), figuratively deployed to subjugate those under it.

James T. McIlwain, MD, is Professor of Neurosciences Emeritus, Brown University.

– James T. McIlwain, MD
e-mail: james_mcilwain@brown.edu

RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
DAVID GIFFORD, MD, MPH
DIRECTOR OF HEALTH

VITAL STATISTICS

EDITED BY COLLEEN FONTANA, STATE REGISTRAR

Rhode Island Monthly Vital Statistics Report Provisional Occurrence Data from the Division of Vital Records

Underlying Cause of Death	Reporting Period			
	November 2009	12 Months Ending with November 2009		
	Number (a)	Number (a)	Rates (b)	YPLL (c)
Diseases of the Heart	200	2,356	224.2	3,324.5
Malignant Neoplasms	179	2,238	213.0	6,317.5
Cerebrovascular Diseases	41	433	41.2	834.5
Injuries (Accidents/Suicide/Homicde)	54	586	55.8	9,873.5
COPD	30	521	49.6	312.5

Vital Events	Reporting Period		
	May 2010	12 Months Ending with May 2010	
	Number	Number	Rates
Live Births	1,010	12,137	11.4*
Deaths	805	9,123	8.5*
Infant Deaths	(6)	(77)	6.3#
Neonatal Deaths	(4)	(63)	5.3#
Marriages	549	6,030	5.6*
Divorces	160	3,153	3.0*
Induced Terminations	363	4,225	348.1#
Spontaneous Fetal Deaths	42	693	57.1#
Under 20 weeks gestation	(38)	(620)	51.1#
20+ weeks gestation	(4)	(73)	6.0#

(a) Cause of death statistics were derived from the underlying cause of death reported by physicians on death certificates.

(b) Rates per 100,000 estimated population of 1,067,610.

(c) Years of Potential Life Lost (YPLL).

Note: Totals represent vital events which occurred in Rhode Island for the reporting periods listed above. Monthly provisional totals should be analyzed with caution because the numbers may be small and subject to seasonal variation.

* Rates per 1,000 estimated population
\# Rates per 1,000 live births