

Senior moments: glitches in the human computer

Worried that you're losing your marbles because you can't remember a name? DICK LUMSDEN joins the club

IN the lifetime of our planet, we humans haven't been around all that long.

In fact, the generally accepted view is that if Earth was just one year old, human life has been around for only 23 minutes – and the industrial revolution happened just one second ago!

When you think how much science has learned in that second, what will we know by the time another couple of minutes have passed?

It's no wonder then, that we regularly see things that were treated as gospel a few years ago being properly debunked.

For instance, when I was young, I was once told that every pint of beer I drank would kill off 350 brain cells. I have gone through my entire adult life guiltily believing that I was killing off a few more each day.

But I was also told that humans only ever use about 10 per cent of their brains, so I never really worried about the cells I was "killing", just assumed they were part of the other 90 per cent.

But now scientists say that both of these beliefs are just urban myths. That, in fact, the average healthy adult uses just about every part of their brain every day, and that alcohol doesn't actually kill brain cells, it just limits their effectiveness.

So that's good news then. No growing pile of decomposing brain cells rattling about inside my head... and a proper workout every day for my grey matter.

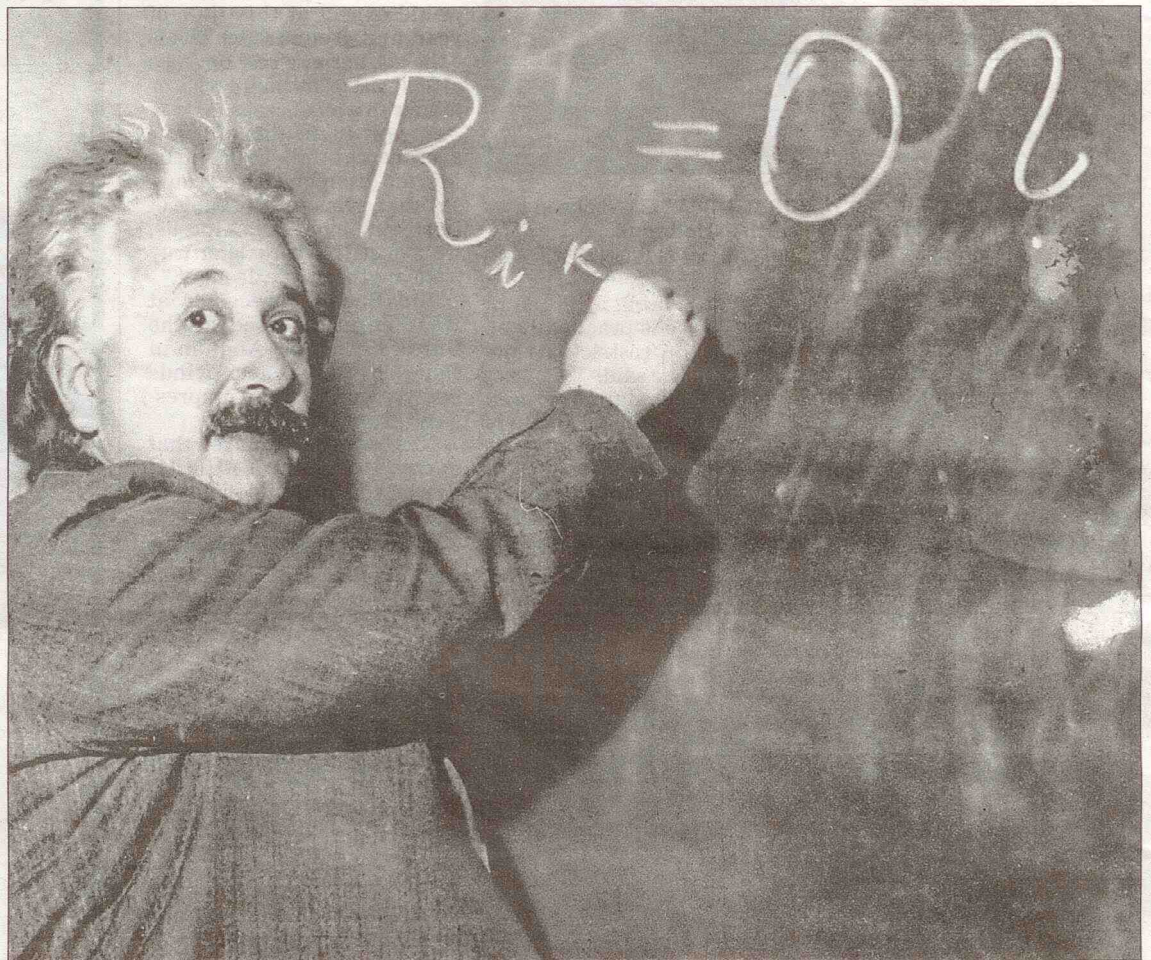
So why is it that almost every day I have either a "senior moment" or a TOTT (tip-of-the tongue episode)?

I get up from my desk with purpose, walk across the room and completely forget what I was going for. Or in the middle of a conversation I'll forget someone's name... it's on the tip of my tongue but I just can't grab it.

We were led to believe that these were signs of an ageing brain, of us oldies getting past our prime.

But scientists in America now believe that these incidents don't necessarily mean we are losing our marbles. The new theory goes that we don't recall things because we just filed the original information badly, and our brain is having trouble finding it.

You see, the problem doesn't lie in the grey matter, it apparently lies in the white matter – the fibres which carry the messages



BRAIN POWER: Einstein said: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them," if that helps...

Photograph: AP

overworked and, just like an old computer taking longer and longer to open a document, it takes longer for us to retrieve what we were searching our brain for. The information is still in there, but our operating system is getting out of date if you like.

We might not be able to update the operating system, but we can find a work around.

Albert Einstein said: "We can't solve problems using the same thinking that created them". So it is in that spirit that I was interested to read this week about some of these new theories coming out of California (surprise, surprise) about how we can give the old brain a helping hand.

As we get older and more set in our ways, it is easy to develop more and more routines. We do the same things, at the same times; we mix with the same people; we visit the same places;

with different people, doing different things and visiting different places.

Taking ourselves out of our comfort zones makes us think more laterally and actually does far more to train our brains than all of the hype peddled by computer game manufacturers who would have us staring at four inch screens all day.

Simple changes such as taking a different route to work, or starting to learn a foreign language, or maybe even shopping somewhere different, all challenge the norm and make us take note of what is around us.

But hang on – this is all supposed to be new and revelatory. But haven't we been told for years that children (and grandchildren) keep you young; or that travel broadens the mind?

I think the truth of the matter is that the scientists are still learning themselves.

haven't had time to warm up properly yet.

In another few years they'll no doubt tell us that they were wrong. And that what we should be doing is hanging upside down by our ankles for 20 minutes before we go to bed so that everything we learned that day goes right to the top of our brain and then filters down into pigeon holes as we sleep.

For now though, I'll take comfort from the fact that having senior moments and TOTTs doesn't necessarily mean I'm losing it – and that my daily tittle isn't killing brain cells, just sending them off for a nice snooze!

■ Dick Lumsden is Managing Director of Owl Marketing Solutions, a specialist in marketing and advertising to older consumers. If you have any views on this article, or are over 50 and would like to take part occasionally in some