



Judi Spiers on Monday

Read Judi's column every week in the Western Morning News

Thumbs up to the unsung hero of the hand

I'VE never really given much thought to my thumbs. I always think of them as the 'Billy No Mates' of the hand. Rarely adorned with a ring and at most painted to match the fingers. Halfway down the hand on their own whilst index, middle and ring finger, and the delightfully named 'pinkie', all share the limelight. Even the name is dull. 'Thumb' just one consonant away from 'thump'.

The reason I mention thumbs is that one Sunday evening recently I found myself in the NHS Walk In Centre in Exeter. I'd been working in the garden that week, without gloves as usual, and had picked up a few thorns. Not big ones just those tiny little hair-like creatures that don't pierce the skin too far but almost sit on the surface. Well I could see a small dot on the pad of my thumb and started 'worrying' it eventually taking a needle to it and rooting around. Big mistake. The following day my thumb was twice the size so that I could barely bend it, scarlet and throbbing like a Tom 'n Jerry thumb hit by a mallet!

I was on duty with the Exeter Port



> Judi with the British Academy of Floral Art's Tina Parkes, left, and Julie Collins

Authority on board the Harbour Master's boat the Pride of Exeter and of course showed the fellas my injury, which received no sympathy at all. It was regatta day for the yacht club and the amateur rowers and our job was

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to be a reassuring presence and make sure no errant water sport fiends went tearing through the courses exceeding the regulatory 10 knots. It was my turn to helm the boat.

I assumed my position and reached down with my right hand for what I would have called the gear stick, better known to all 'boaties' as the throttle, in order to depress the button on the side of the shift and start moving forward.

It required my thumb and I nearly shot through the roof of the cabin. Naturally I soldiered on without a word of complaint. Well only from the rest of the team when I went into reverse by mistake just as they'd got their first cuppas of the day. You'd think I'd covered them with boiling oil to hear the yelps.

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1. Press the buttons on the phone
2. Unlock my front door
3. Unzip my trousers and unbutton my shirt
4. Clean my glasses
5. Attend to all manner of personal actions and tragically peel veg, make

tea and wash up!!!! Fortunately my husband, exhausted from a 100-mile yomp in the Brecon Beacons was on hand with two perfectly functioning thumbs to step in.

The following day I was due to officially open the new premises of the British Academy of Floral Art at Doddiscombsleigh.

The weather was foul but prosecco flowed, the air was heavy with sweet smelling floral extravaganzas, which filled the studios, and a beautiful flower bower adorned the entrance where I stood to perform my official duty. A ribbon of flowers was strung across in front of me and I was handed the scissors.

It was then that I realized what else you cant do without a functioning thumb.

6. Use scissors

Hence, that night, the Walk in Centre. What a wonderful service that is. Whilst I was told the waiting time at A&E that evening was 5 hours I was in and out in 45 minutes, having been reassured that I didn't have sepsis and had my finger dressed.

So once again 'thumbs up' to the NHS!

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Write: Studio 5-11, Millbay Road, Plymouth PL1 3LF Email: wmnletters@westernmorningnews.co.uk

Our precious 999 emergency service needs to be treated with respect

IT is a message regularly repeated by the ambulance service which covers the Westcountry - and one which needs to be taken seriously as lifesaving crews find themselves tackling unprecedented levels of demand.

Only dial 999 if it is a genuine emergency.

With resources limited and calls rising, the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust has issued a statement warning that it is having to prioritise critically ill patients.

For most of us, calling 999 is, thankfully, a rare event, taken in extreme circumstances.

However, the ambulance service

receives thousands of calls that could better be dealt with via the non-emergency 111 number or by a local GP or pharmacist.

Every now and then the service reveals details of time-wasting calls, and last year extreme examples included a caller asking what coronavirus was; a man phoning to complain that he had been blocked in by an ambulance attending an emergency call; a caller wanting to wish staff a Merry Christmas and another asking if his local A&E department was open.

Talk to any paramedic and they could give numerous examples of having to attend minor ailments

which used up precious time and staffing resources.

The service is also plagued by frequent callers - some making dozens of unnecessary 999 calls a month. In 2019 it was reported that there were around 2,000 active frequent callers to the ambulance service across the South West. In a number of cases offenders have been taken to court and convicted for abusing the system.

People are rightly concerned when they, or those close to them, become ill or suffer an injury. They want the reassurance of expert medics, and promptly.

However, the South Western

Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust says the public should only call 999 "in a genuine medical emergency when somebody is seriously injured or ill and their life is at risk".

For other medical concerns people are encouraged to contact NHS 111 for advice and support.

Half the incidents dealt with by SWASFT do not need a patient to be taken by ambulance to an emergency department.

The trust plea comes as the service experienced its busiest week on record at the start of this month, responding to a total of 22,041 incidents during the seven days up until Sunday July 4. The rise in demand

follows the easing of lockdown restrictions - though is not directly related to Covid-19 infections.

People need to make a judgement call as to the seriousness of medical concerns or mishap before dialling 999 or heading straight for their nearest overloaded hospital A&E. In life-threatening cases don't delay, but other matters can be treated with a less urgent response.

Inappropriate use of the 999 service puts unnecessary pressure on limited ambulance resources, and can delay emergency care to those most in need.

If we ever require critical care, we all want to know it is available.