Some people taste musical sounds, others feel colours or see sounds [1]. Of the many somatic sensations to which man is heir, synaesthesiae are among the most intriguing. Synaesthesia is an involuntary physical experience of a cross-modal sensory linkage; it affects about 1 in 1,150 females and 1 in 7,150 males [2].

‘Itch’ derives from 9th century Old English giccan, akin to Old High German jucchen, to itch. ‘Referred itch’ or Mitempfindung is analogous, though not strictly a cross-modal sensation. It affects approximately 1 in 5 healthy individuals. One patient reported, ‘when I scratch a small area on the right cheek I feel a sharp pricking pain for a moment on the front of my chest near the right nipple. It repeats 3 or 4 times, immediately after each scratch but then fatigues and won’t recur, till a later time.’

Its location and referral are inconstant. A scratch below the knee has been referred to the ipsilateral scapula; a scratch on the outer border of the foot may evoke the sensation in the abdomen. Crucially, the affected areas seem not to correspond to known sensory somatic afferents.

In 1844 Johannes Muller [3] used the name Mitempfindung (or Mitempfindungen), but it was earlier described in 1733 by Stephen Hales [4], the English priest who was also the first to measure blood pressure via a canula in a horse’s leg.

Martin noted [5] that physicians have described their own referred sensations. Sherrington could produce dysaesthesiae at both elbows just above the medial epicon-
1 Evenson B: Symphony of the senses. National Post (Canada), Feb 26, 2002.