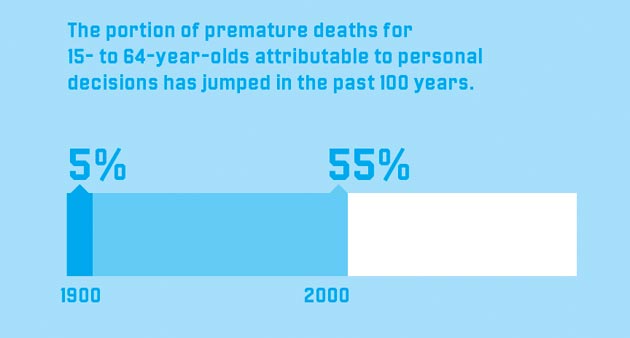
**Ralph Keeney: Cheat Death**

By Thomas Goetz [Email](http://www.wired.com/services/feedback/letterstoeditor)09.21.09

[](http://www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-10/ff_smartlist_keeney)

*Wired*'s Smart List 2009

[[http://www.wired.com/images/article/magazine/1710/ff_smartlist_t.jpg](http://www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-10/ff_smartlist)12 Shocking Ideas That Could Change the World](http://www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-10/ff_smartlist)

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**Ralph Keeney wants** to improve our lives—by making us confront our deaths. In a recent study published in the journal *Operations Research*, [Keeney](http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/faculty_research/faculty_directory/keeney/), a decision analyst at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, crunched data from the Centers for Disease Control to assess how many deaths in the US are due to personal choices—things like smoking, overeating, or unsafe sex. The results: A remarkable 55 percent of deaths for people age 15 to 64 can be attributed to decisions with readily available alternatives. In other words, most people are the agents of their own demise. That's a vast difference from a century ago, when, Keeney estimates, a scant 5 percent of deaths were brought on by personal decisions (infectious diseases account for most of the rest).

So are we facing an epidemic of stupidity? More like an epidemic of ignorance. Our health and well-being are determined by numerous daily cost-benefit calculations. But too many of us get the math wrong. We may know that it's bad to drive without a seat belt. But we don't correctly weigh the cost (the three seconds it takes to buckle up) against the risk (death).

Keeney notes that society already holds people accountable for some actions: Some workplaces disqualify smokers as job candidates; alcoholics are often denied liver transplants. We could deploy more of these penalties: costlier health insurance for the obese, or criminalizing texting while driving the way we do drunk driving. But in the end, punishment is inevitable anyway. "The ultimate penalty is death," Keeney says. "I don't want to totally thwart survival of the fittest."