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Memories of Stata

Tony Lachenbruch

I first learned of Stata in the mid-1980s when the UCLA Biostatistics program was looking for a simple statistics program that could be used by students in basic biostatistics courses. We had a computing lab, and we helped students over the hurdles. This was a time when at least one student put the disk in every way but the correct one: once that was corrected, few problems surfaced. We decided to purchase Stata for the computer lab, and I got a copy of my own.

Around that time, I gave a talk to the Southern California Chapter of the *American Statistical Association* on what I would like to see in a statistics program. It was basically that, as a minimum, I'd like to have what is covered in a basic one-year statistics course. There was one program vendor there, Bill Gould. He commented (rather gently, now that I think of it) that a mere checklist was really not sufficient: more important things were how the interface worked and were the programs extensible. The idea of being able to program in the statistics software's own language was still a few years away.

I published a simple tip in the *Stata Technical Bulletin* (A keyboard shortcut, *STB* 9: 9, 1992) in which I noted that one could omit missing values by typing `if x < .` instead of `if x = ..`. That would save a keystroke each time, and I found it easier to type. The tip is probably my shortest contribution to any publication, but I have been told that it has helped ward off several repetitive strain injuries. Now that extended missing values `.a` through `.z` have been added (in Stata 8), my shortcut is officially recommended in the manuals for this purpose.

In the beginning, I used Stata for analyzing data and providing classroom demonstrations. After a while, I learned how useful Stata was for simulations, which have been central to my work. For the last 13 years, I have conducted a number of studies of the robustness of various common statistical procedures. We have also wished to study new methods for assessing consistency of lots of drug product. Manufacturers must show that they can make lots in a consistent fashion so that they do not differ from one another by very much. We have used the Stata density-estimation routines to fit the data from each lot and compute the amount of overlap to obtain a measure of lot consistency.

About the Author

Peter A. Lachenbruch is a Biostatistician who has served on the faculties of the University of North Carolina, University of Iowa, and UCLA. For the last 11 years, he has been the Director of the Division of Biostatistics at the U. S. Food and Drug Administration. He has used Stata since 1985.