

RIGHT NOW



On the rostrum at the Ig Nobel ceremonies, from left: genuine Nobel laureates Sheldon Glashow and William Lipscomb, MIT staff member Robert Dimmick (in Louis XIV garb), and actor Russell Johnson, who played the professor on "Gilligan's Island." Johnson phones in a fast-food order to "Slick Willy's Hi Fat Emporium," whose courier delivered several snacks during the ceremonies. Glashow unceremoniously devours a hamburger acquired on a previous run.

The Ig Nobel Prizes

Not all prizes in science honor striking findings or imaginative theories. Some, in fact, celebrate results at the opposite end of the spectrum.

Yes, there were top hats and formal dinner jackets. A procession of worthies opened the ceremonies with suitable pomp; on the rostrum, a brass quintet sounded fanfares, and several Nobel laureates gave stirring speeches. Prizes were awarded in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, economics, peace.

But there was also a biology prize for a pioneering study, "Salmonella Excretion in Joy-Riding Pigs." An award for "visionary technology" went to the inventor of a projection device that enables car drivers to watch television as they drive, and to the Michigan legislature for legalizing the gadget. A statistician who calculated the exact odds (8,606,091,751,882 to 1) that Mikhail Gorbachev is the Antichrist ran away with the mathematics prize. Yes, this was the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony, held annually since 1991 to recognize, according

to its program, individuals whose achievements cannot or should not be reproduced.

The Ig Nobels are jointly sponsored by the MIT Museum and the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*, a jocular magazine that calls itself "the publication of record for overly stimulating research and ideas." Its editor, Marc Abrahams '78, who presided over the Ig Nobel observances, defines two categories of people who win the Igs: "First, those who persistently work at convincing the world and themselves of something that apparently just isn't so. Second, people who have done something whimsical and wonderful."

The former group probably includes 1993 economics winner Ravi Batra of Southern Methodist University. His bestselling book, *The Great Depression of 1990*, forecast a worldwide economic collapse that remains well behind schedule. The latter category might contain the three "medical men of mercy" who authored the research report "Acute Management of the Zipper-Entrapped Penis" for *The Journal of Emergency Medicine*.

The October rites included seven Heisenberg

Certainty Lectures. These were strictly limited to thirty seconds by a referee and named after 1932 Nobel physics laureate Werner Heisenberg, author of the "uncertainty principle regarding measurements of the position and velocity of subatomic particles." Three of the Certainty lecturers were genuine Nobel laureates, and they happened to come from the Harvard faculty: 1976 chemistry laureate William Lipscomb, Lawrence professor of chemistry emeritus; Sheldon Glashow, Higgins professor of physics and a 1979 Nobel physics honorand; and Baird professor of science Dudley Herschbach, winner of the 1986 Nobel in chemistry. Herschbach spoke via audiotape with slide accompaniment, adding his "increment of admonishment to that already heaped on the awardees."

Another Certainty lecturer was "the professor from 'Gilligan's Island'" in the person of actor Russell Johnson, who actually played the professor on the famous sitcom and flew in from Seattle for the festivities. Johnson wondered, in retrospect, at his televised ability "to make a radio out of a coconut, and yet not be able to get us off that island." Another Certainty lecturer, MIT economics professor Paul Krugman, warned that "last year, world imports exceeded world exports by \$100 billion. Obviously, we have a trade imbalance with extraterrestrial economies. Space aliens are stealing American jobs."

Some prizes touched on genuine issues in science, like the literature award to the 976 co-authors of a medical research paper that had a

hundred times as many authors as pages. Marcia Angell, executive editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which published the paper, walked to the lectern to "accept with dismay," noting that "the co-authors could not agree on the wording of an acceptance speech."

Abrahams's *Journal of Irreproducible Results* circulates bimonthly to six thousand subscribers and three thousand newsstand purchasers. At \$21 for six issues, its readership is rising, and it has recently gone on-line with an electronic version on the Internet academic computer network. Its readers now range across 41 countries; along with scientists, board members, and others, they submit Ig Nobel nominations year-round. Some repeatedly nominated candidates, like tarnished AIDS researcher Robert Gallo, must still live on without benefit of an Ig Nobel. But not to worry. "If somebody is deserving," declares Abrahams, "their achievements will stand the test of time."

—Craig Lambert

Caffeine Paradox

Caffeine, once promoted as the drug of the "coffee achievers," can actually trigger a variety of responses, including fatigue and energy loss.

Waiter, waiter, percolator! If that's how you start the day, it may have effects you never suspected. Common lore has it that coffee—and particularly the caffeine it contains—makes the drinker more alert, awake, and active. For many people this is true, but, warns Quentin Regestein, "there is an enormous individual variation in reaction to caffeine." Regestein, associate professor of psychiatry and director of the sleep clinic at Brigham and Women's Hospital, has found that caffeine can have a "paradoxical effect" on some patients, making them groggy or sleepier, or have a far stronger wakeful effect than expected.

The half-life of caffeine in human blood plasma is about ten hours and varies little, so the drug's absorption is fairly constant across individuals. However, explains Regestein, the central nervous system's receptor sensitivity to caffeine varies tremendously from person to person.

This began to come clear to Regestein as he worked with patients on various sleep disorders—including insomnia, excessive sleepiness, sleepwalking, sleep-talking, or bed wetting. Some time ago, one patient—a 36-year-old psychiatrist—had difficulty sleeping. "She remedied her problems with her boyfriend, with her boss, her this, her that; everything was fine," says Regestein. "She was a paragon of virtue, except she had one cup of coffee in the morning. I said, 'I don't know what's wrong, but there's

Ig Nobel Causes

According to Marc Abrahams, the Ig Nobels "take the place of things like the Golden Fleece awards" that former U.S. Senator William Proxmire once presented to tax-funded boondoggles. "The Golden Fleece awards weren't always well researched. Sometimes they went to things that sounded foolish but were not. We check things out pretty extensively."

Sex as a Heap of Malfunctioning Rubble

Since its founding in 1955, the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* has published tongue-in-cheek research reports, oddball puzzles, "scientific gossip," and offbeat interviews with famous scientists. *The Boston Globe* called it "the *Mad* magazine for the Stephen Hawking crowd." A recent paperback, *Sex as a Heap of Malfunctioning Rubble* (Workman, 1993), collects some of the *Journal's* best moments, including "A Briefer History of Time," "Lukewarm Fission," "How to Make a Scientific Lecture Unbearable," "Multivariate Analysis of Spaghetti Sauce Stains," and, for earth-bound astronomers, "The Black Hole of Calcutta." The book gives detailed accounts of the first two Ig Nobel festivities, one headlined: "NO DEATHS AT FIRST IG NOBEL CEREMONY."

BANG!

"A Briefer History of Time," in its entirety.



Paradoxical caffeine: it makes some people sleepy.