

Bee stings, research that makes you go 'huh?' win Ig Nobels (Update)

September 17 2015, by Mark Pratt



Michael Smith, a Cornell University graduate student who allowed himself to be stung about 200 times by bees to determine where you feel the most pain on the body from a sting, makes an acceptance speech while being honored during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. Smith research concluded that the nostril, the upper lip and the male sex organ feel the most pain. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

A Cornell University graduate student who allowed honeybees to sting

him in 25 places and a group of scientists who concluded it's possible for one man to father 888 children are among the winners of this year's Ig Nobels, which honor humorous scientific achievement.

Michael Smith estimates he was stung about 200 times during his 2012 honeybee study. His conclusion: The three most painful places to get stung are the nostril, the upper lip and the male sex organ.

"A sting to the nostril is so painful it's like a whole body experience," he said.

Other winners being honored Thursday night at the 25th annual ceremony at Harvard University include a trio of linguists who discovered that almost every language in the world uses the word "huh" for clarification in a conversation and researchers who found that corporate CEOs take less professional risk if directly affected by natural disasters as children.

Real Nobel laureates hand out the prizes, and each winner receives a cash award: a Zimbabwean 10 trillion-dollar bill, the equivalent of a couple of U.S. dollars.

Smith shared the Ig Nobel for physiology and entomology with Justin Schmidt, an adjunct professor at the University of Arizona who devised a pain scale for insect stings.

His advice: Do not get stung by the tarantula hawk, a nasty looking wasp found in the Southwestern U.S. with a stinger about a quarter-inch long.

"The sting is entirely nontoxic but hurts like the bejesus," Schmidt said.



The Ig Nobel trophy, made from an empty flower pot and letters from the element charts, is hoisted up during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

Mark Dingemans and two colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, Netherlands, won the Ig Nobel for literature for determining that the word "huh" is used in languages around the world, including some of the most obscure.

"A system for fixing misunderstandings is clearly a crucial part of language," he said. "'Huh?'" is one element of this system: It's the basic error signal people fall back on if all else fails."

Elisabeth Oberzaucher and a colleague at the University of Vienna in Austria won the mathematics prize for figuring out whether it was

possible for Moroccan Emperor Moulay Ismael to have sired 888 children—and that's the conservative estimate.

Ismael fathered the children during a roughly 30-year reign that ended in 1727. It sounds exhausting, but the bottom line is, yes, it is possible to father that many children if he had sex daily. The study found that it could be done with as few as 65 women, not the 500 in his harem.

Raghu Rau, professor of finance at the University of Cambridge, and his colleagues won for their study that found business leaders more directly affected by natural disasters as children took less risk during their careers.



Audience members launch paper airplanes during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

Rau uses Apple as an example. Late CEO Steve Jobs, who lived through a deadly landslide near his home in San Francisco as a child, ran the company conservatively. His successor, Tim Cook, witnessed few fatalities despite regular tornadoes while growing up in Alabama and has made more risky business decisions.

"Think of yourself as a member of a board of directors: When you try to hire a CEO, do you want a risk taker or not?" Rau said.



Michael Smith, left, accepts his trophy from Dudley Herschbach, the 1986 Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, while being honored during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. Smith's research concluded that the nostril, the upper lip and the male sex organ feel the most pain from a bee sting. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

As usual, the winners were thrilled with the honor.

"Sometimes these crazy things provide a lot of insight," said Schmidt, the bug guy.



Nobel Laureates, from left, Dudley Herschbach, Eric Maskin and Carol Greider wear hologram viewing glasses during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)



While wearing a toilet seat on his head, David Hu accepts the Physics Prize, for his research on the principle that all mammals empty their bladders of urine in about 21 seconds, while being honored during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)



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Gregory Weiss, of the University of California-Irvine, holds up two eggs in plastic bags while being honored during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. Weiss and a team of researchers won the prize for chemistry after inventing a chemical recipe to partially un-boil an egg. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)



Nobel Laureates Carol Greider, left, and Jack Szostak embrace an audience member, who won a double-date with the two Nobel winners, during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)



With a toilet plunger attached to the seat of his pants, Bruno Grossi, a researcher from Chile, shows how a chicken would walk like a dinosaur with a weighted stick attached to its tail, while being honored during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. Grossi and researchers from the University of Chile-Santiago won the biology prize. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)



Biologist Elisabeth Oberzaucher, of the University of Vienna, accepts the prize for mathematics while being honored during a performance at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. Oberzaucher and a group of researchers won for using mathematical techniques to determine how the emperor of Morroco could have bore 888 children during his lifetime. The Ig Nobel prize is an award handed out by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine at Harvard University for silly sounding scientific discoveries that often have surprisingly practical applications. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

More information: Annals of Improbable Research magazine, www.improbable.com

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Citation: Bee stings, research that makes you go 'huh?' win Ig Nobels (Update) (2015, September 17) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-09-bee-huh-ig-nobels.html>

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