

Training surgeons like dogs, icky money win 2019 Ig Nobels

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From left, Nobel Laureates Rich Roberts (Medicine, 1993), Eric Maskin (Economics, 2007), and Jerome Friedman (Physics, 1990) laugh during the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)

Training surgeons is as easy as training dolphins or dogs.

At least according to a study that Thursday earned a 2019 Ig Nobel, the annual Nobel Prize spoof that rewards weird, odd and sometimes head-scratching scientific discoveries.

This year's winners included: Dutch and Turkish researchers who figured out which nation has the yuckiest money, an Italian scientist who urges consumption of pizza for its [health benefits](#), and an Iranian engineer who obtained a U.S patent for a diaper-changing machine.

Karen Pryor, Theresa McKeon and Dr. I. Martin Levy figured out that a common technique used for training animals called operant learning—or clicker training—can be used to make better surgeons.

In short, a [mechanical device](#) that emits an audible click is used to reinforce positive behavior.

It's not quite the same as giving a doctor a treat and a pat on the head, but it still works, said Pryor, a scientist, writer and animal trainer who has been using the technique for decades.

"Traditionally, experienced surgeons will train the younger surgeons and they make it quite hard," which leads to tension and fear of failure, she said.



Andreas Voss, left, and his son Timothy Voss, of The Netherlands, receive the Ig Nobel award in economics for testing which country's paper money is best at transmitting dangerous bacteria, at the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the *Annals of Improbable Research* magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)

"With our method, they learned to use the tools with great confidence and calmness and turned them into calm, pleasant, serene people," she said.

The study published in 2015 by the journal *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research* found that surgeons trained using the clicker method

performed surgical procedures with better precision.

The awards at the 29th annual ceremony at Harvard University were handed out by real Nobel laureates, and as has become the tradition, featured the world premiere of a mini opera titled "Creatures of Habit."

The winners received \$10 trillion Zimbabwean dollars, which is virtually worthless, and each was given one minute to deliver an acceptance speech enforced by an 8-year-old girl whining "Please stop. I'm bored."

This year's shenanigans also included a tribute to Nobel Prize-winning physicist Roy Glauber, known for his humbleness and sense of humor, who for years attended the Ig Nobel ceremony and always helped sweep up afterward. He died in December at age 93.



Shigeru Watanabe, of Japan, receives the Ig Nobel award in chemistry for estimating the total saliva volume produced per day by a typical five-year-old, at the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)

Andreas Voss and his colleagues found that germophobes might want to avoid Romanian bank notes.

Their study concluded that three types of drug-resistant bacteria clung the longest to Romanian money when compared to several other international currencies, including the euro, U.S. and Canadian dollars and Indian rupees.

Romanians shouldn't take offense at having the dirtiest money though.

The researchers said Romanian bank notes include a polymer fiber to discourage counterfeiting and improve durability, which allows the growth and transmission of drug resistant pathogens.

Voss, a professor at Radboud University Center for Infectious Diseases, Canisius-Wilhelmina Hospital, Nijmegen, the Netherlands, has a simple solution for people squeamish about handling paper money crawling with bacteria.

"Use plastic and electronic payment," he said via email. "Actually, I hardly ever use cash anymore."



David Hu speaks as Patricia Yang, right, listens as they receive the Ig Nobel award in physics for studying how and why wombats make cubed poo, at the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)



Audience members toss paper airplanes at the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)



Marc Abrahams holds up the 2019 Ig Nobel award at the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)



Dr. Thomas Michael plays the accordion as the ensemble performs, "The Creatures of Habit Opera" at the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)



Marc Abrahams, far right, presides over the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)



Silvano Gallus, of Italy, waves as he receives the Ig Nobel award in medicine for collecting evidence that pizza might protect against illness and death, if the pizza is made and eaten in Italy, at the 29th annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony at Harvard University, Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, in Cambridge, Mass. The spoof prizes for weird and sometimes head-scratching scientific achievement are bestowed by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine, and handed out by real Nobel laureates. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)



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Silvano Gallus won an Ig Nobel for his research that found yes, pizza is good for you. Well, maybe just pizza that's made and consumed in Italy.

"We found that pizza consumption in Italy was protective for many chronic diseases that are known to be influenced by diet: digestive tract cancers and infarction," Gallus, head of the Laboratory of Lifestyle

Epidemiology at the Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche Mario Negri in Milan, Italy said in an email.

He noted that many pizza ingredients are associated with the Mediterranean diet, which has known health benefits.

Like many of the winners, Gallus, a renowned scientist, was thrilled to win an Ig Nobel.

"I am honored to have obtained this achievement for a bizarre but important award," he said.

The event was produced by the science humor magazine Annals of Improbable Research and co-sponsored by the Harvard-Radcliffe Science Fiction Association and the Harvard-Radcliffe Society of Physics Students.

More information: www.improbable.com/

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