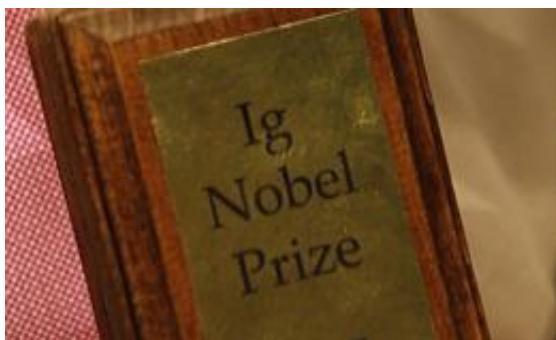


# Zany scientists honored in alternative Nobels (Update)

September 29 2011, by Sebastian Smith



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The annual Ig Nobel prizes, now in their 21st year, were given at Harvard University in front of 1,200 spectators, with real Nobel Prize winners handing out the honors.

To win, scientists must "first make people laugh, and then make them think," according to the Ig Nobel ethos.

The biology prize -- often a good source of humor at the Igs -- went to Darryl Gwynne of Canada, Australia and the United States, and David Rentz of Australia, for their groundbreaking paper titled: "Beetles on the Bottle: Male Buprestids Mistake Stubbis For Females."

Which to the layman translates as: [beetles tragically attempting to mate with an Australian beer bottle.](#)

Several prizes delved into the extremes of human behavior under stress.

Take, for example, the medicine prize, won by a Dutch-Belgian-Australian team with "Inhibitory Spillover," a probe into the age-old challenge of needing to pee at a busy moment.

The team investigated why "[people make better decisions about some kinds of things -- but worse decisions about other kinds of things, when they have a strong urge to urinate,](#)" the awards citation said.

Research into the psychology and physiology prizes must have been a great deal less stressful.

The former went to a University of Oslo professor who looked at "why, in everyday life, people sigh?"

The second concerned yawning in red-footed tortoises. For those who've been wondering, the British-Dutch-Hungarian-Austrian team has finally established that there is "no evidence of contagious yawning" in the creatures.

More physically demanding subjects bagged the physics and public safety prizes.

A French-Dutch group won the physics prize "for determining why

discus throwers become dizzy and why hammer throwers don't."

John Senders of the University of Toronto sounded lucky to be alive to collect his public safety gong for studying the performance of a driver "on a major highway while a visor repeatedly flaps down over his face, blinding him."

At least Senders wasn't asked to test the "wasabi alarm." This invention was the subject of the chemistry prize given to a Japanese team who determined "the ideal density of airborne wasabi (pungent horseradish) to awaken sleeping people in case of fire."



Maokto Imai, center, holds up the Ig Nobel prize in Chemistry as colleagues Yukinobu Tajima, third from left, and Hideaki Goto, second from left, and Nobel Laureate Roy Glauber (Physics 2005), right, look on during the 21st annual Ig Nobel Awards ceremony at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., Thursday, Sept. 29, 2011. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer)

The mathematics prize was awarded jointly to six academics who over the years have emphatically predicted the end of the world, and are still around to hear of their mock-honor. The citation thanked them "for teaching the world to be careful when making mathematical assumptions."

Of course, the last laugh might be on Ig Nobels, because one of those mathematics laureates still believes life will end on October 21 this year.

The peace prize was awarded to the mayor of Vilnius in Lithuania, who became so fed up with a parking violator that he took an armored personnel carrier and simply ran over the offending luxury car.

To those amazed at how scientists can achieve so much, the literature prize at the Harvard ceremony could offer a clue.

John Perry of Stanford University was honored for his "Theory of Structured Procrastination" -- namely the technique of always working on something important, "using it as a way to avoid doing something that's even more important."

The prizes are tongue-in-cheek and the presentations likewise.

Asked by the master of ceremonies what the laureates receive, an assistant announced: "an Ig Nobel prize." Asked if there was anything more, she added: "a piece of paper saying they've won an Ig Nobel prize."

But the evening has a serious side, giving eminent researchers a chance to socialize and describe their work -- which is only unintentionally funny -- to a theater packed with other science lovers.

The prize itself is a board with tiny legs and a depiction of chemistry's

periodic table. "A periodic table table," as the master of ceremonies deadpanned.

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