

Liquid cats and blood-sucking bats: 2017's Ig Nobel awards

15 September 2017, by Mariëtte Le Roux



"Can a Cat Be Both a Solid and a Liquid?" asked French researcher Marc-Antoine Fardin, who won this year's Ig Nobel for physics

Can a cat be both liquid and solid at the same time? Have vampire bats developed a taste for human blood? Will holding a crocodile bolster or blunt your gambling drive?

These questions may appear improbable, yet they are important, say the organisers of the annual Ig Nobel awards "for achievements that first make people laugh, then make them think".

Researchers who invested time and money in solving these and other burning questions were honoured Thursday with Ig Nobels in 10 categories ranging from economics, anatomy and biology to fluid dynamics, medicine and cognition.

The awards were presented at Harvard University by bemused laureates of the perhaps better-known Nobel Prize, which the Ig Nobels have spoofed since 1991, tongue firmly in cheek.

"The winners this year have truly earned their prizes," master of ceremonies Mark Abrahams, editor of *The Annals of Improbable Research*—a

science humour magazine—told guests as he unveiled this year's statuette: a mannequin head with a red question mark perched on top.

Winners would also receive \$10 trillion, the presenters announced—albeit of the Zimbabwean variety. That sum was worth about \$8 (six euros) when the bank note was issued in 2009.

The theme of this year's Ig Nobels was "Uncertainty".

"Each winner has done something that makes people laugh, then think," said Abrahams.

The Ig Nobel for physics went to French researcher Marc-Antoine Fardin for a science paper questioning: "Can a Cat Be Both a Solid and a Liquid?"

A liquid, he explained to the audience, is something that can adapt its shape to the container it is in.

As he spoke, photographs of cats in different stages of a liquid-like state, perched in vases, wine glasses and wash basins, flashed on a screen behind him.

Uncool to refuse

The study was a serious attempt to probe "some of the actual questions and problems that are studied in rheology, the study of flows," Fardin said.

"When I was asked if I was willing to accept the [prize](#), the answer was easy," he added. "It might be cool to refuse a Nobel Prize but it's certainly uncool to refuse an Ig Nobel."

This year's peace prize went to a team who investigated "Didgeridoo Playing as Alternative Treatment for Obstructive Sleep Apnoea Syndrome", which included a randomised controlled patient trial and all.

The award for economics went to a US-Australian duo for experiments to discover whether touching a live crocodile would affect a person's willingness to gamble.

The prize for anatomy research went to a study asking "Why Do Old Men Have Big Ears", while the nutrition award went to a research paper entitled: "What's for Dinner? First Report of Human Blood in the Diet of the Hairy-Legged Vampire Bat."

The prize for research into fluid dynamics, according to an Ig Nobel press statement, went to a project observing "the dynamics of liquid-sloshing" when a person walks backwards while carrying a cup of coffee.

The awards are not an attempt at ridiculing science, the Ig Nobel website states.

"Good achievements can also be odd, funny, and even absurd, so can bad achievements," it explains.

"A lot of good science gets attacked because of its absurdity. A lot of bad science gets revered despite its absurdity."

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