



The European Bureau Is Open

by Willem O. de Jongste, *Improbable Research European Bureau staff*

I am at the doorsteps of the Natural History Museum Rotterdam. People of all ages and looks make their way into the building that has a modern yet classic look. A stuffed orang-utan welcomes me; I see what looks like a dried whale penis; and a friendly woman called Olga sticks a sticker on my shirt: "Improbable Research -- European Bureau -- opening 19 May 2006." This gathering marks the opening ceremony of the first and only Improbable Research branch outside the U.S., and the inauguration of the Bureau's Chief, 2003 Ig Nobel prize winner Kees Moeliker.

The Bureau's task is to become Europe's central collecting point for improbable research and Ig Nobel nominations, and to be the base for a series of future public events on the European continent. Next year, 2007, will see the first, perhaps annual, "Ig Nobel Tour of Europe." (The Europe tour will occur in May/June. This is in addition to the annual Ig Nobel Tour of the U.K., which happens every March as part of that nation's National Science Week).

On Historic Ground (Glass)

It is by no means a coincidence that the Bureau is located here. This is historical Ig ground: just outside the building, the first-ever scientifically recorded (and, eventually, Ig-winning) case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck took place. One of the birds -- the victim -- had died in a high-speed collision with a glass wall. Deep down in the museum's storage facilities, Moeliker -- who is the museum's curator of birds -- keeps the stuffed victim as one of his most valuable treasures.

Earlier that day, I watched Moeliker guide Improbable Research editor Marc Abrahams on a little pilgrimage, to the all-glass north wing of the museum, where the now world-famous mallard duck came to its end. Moeliker pointed towards the glass and the green lawn below it, and Abrahams nodded.

The Unfolding of Events

The program starts with (two) words of welcome from Professor Jelle Reumer, director of the museum. Drawn from the tradition of the Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony, the two words are "Welcome, welcome."

Marc Abrahams tells the mostly Dutch audience (some German and Belgian and American nationals are present, too) about the Ig Nobel prizes. Then comes a series of five-minute lectures. Two prominent attendees are appointed as time keepers to make sure the speakers keep it short: science writer Herbert Blankesteyn (on his racing bicycle, and dressed appropriately for that) and Peter van Lindonk, director and founder of the annual PINC (People, Ideas, Nature, Creativity) conference (also dressed accordingly). Simultaneous translations of the oral presentations are done by Olga Vierbergen (into Finnish), Wim van Egmond (Dutch), Bahram Sadeghi (Farsi) and Dennis Mendez Contreras (Latin American Spanish). The audience looks confused, perhaps happily, and probably does not know what to expect.

The first five-minute lecture is by Erwin Kompanje of the Erasmus MC University Medical Center Rotterdam. He tells about his rediscovery in the 18th-century medical literature of a remarkable penis-shortening device that he will reveal in the October issue of the *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, and that will undoubtedly help those equipped or confronted with an exceptionally long male member.

Wolter Seuntjens (Free University Amsterdam) presents his latest insights into the hidden (erotic) aspects of yawning, and Hein Meijers, communication director of NWO -- The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research -- puts improbable research into a European perspective.

Top: A portion of the door to the room where the drawer is kept in a desk. Photo: Kees Moeliker.



Audience members at European Bureau opening, May 2006. Photo: Kees Moeliker.

Then a smart 10-year-old girl gets the microphone. She is Kees Moeliker's daughter Sezen, and she treats us to a talk titled "How and why my father won an Ig Nobel prize." To prove the homosexual nature of the necrophilic act that her father witnessed, she nicely points a laser-pointer to a slide of a corkscrew-like appendage of the dead duck's lower body, saying "Dit is de penis van de dode eend" [translation: This is the dead duck's penis]. While waving a stuffed mallard duck above her head, she makes sure that everybody understands that this is *the* duck.

Time has come for the special appearances. Robin Abrahams, Improbable Research's psychology editor, explains how a dream she had about psychologist Steven Pinker eventually led to the birth of the Luxuriant Flowing Hair Club for Scientists (LFHCfS). From the audience rises a famous trio -- Falk Schuch, Andreas Linsner and Kai Jung, chemists at Zentaris GmbH and Men-of-the-Year 2004/2005 of the Club. They journeyed from Frankfurt, Germany, to be part of tonight's historic event. They wave their hair, and answer a dozen or more questions including, "Was your long hair of any help in your scientific careers?" All three scientists say they have no recollection of being short-haired.



Bureau Chief Kees Moeliker displays the Improbable Research European Bureau -- it is actually a desk drawer -- moments after it was officially opened. The Luxuriant Flowing Hair Club's Men-of-the-Year look on. Photo: Robin Abrahams

The Moment: History in a Drawer

At the end of the program comes the ceremony itself. The hushed, excited audience watches the three LFHCfS Men-of-the-Year carry a drawer (from Moeliker's desk) into the room. The soon-to-be Bureau Chief empties the contents of his drawer into a dustbin. Marc Abrahams sticks a small version of the Bureau's logo onto the drawer, declares the Bureau opened, and shakes Moeliker's hand.

The Bureau Chief explains that this very drawer is the European Bureau, and that the museum is not going to erect a new wing to house it. He concludes the evening with a talk titled "Is there life after a dead duck?" There is, apparently.

NOTE: for further details and photos, see

<http://improbable.com/navstrip/airshows/shows/2006/2006-05-Netherlands/2006-05-Netherlands.html>

Visitor Information

The Improbable Research European Bureau is located at the Natuurhistorisch Museum Rotterdam, Westzeedijk 345 (Museumpark), 3015 AA Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and can be reached at +31 10 2660463 or at improbable@nmr.nl. Visitors are welcome -- but please phone or email in advance to make an appointment.



The day after the Luxuriant Flowing Hair Club for Scientists (LFHCfS) Men-of-the-Year took part in the ceremony, they were summoned to Amsterdam where they met this royal personage. Photo: Alice Shirell Kaswell.