of company’s offer

the litigation might very well stretch on for years” (BMJ 2007;335:1011).

Sidney Wolfe, director of the Washington watchdog Public Citizen’s Health Research Group, was critical of Merck’s settlement. He said, “Given what Merck knew, how it misled doctors and others, I don’t think this company has been adequately punished for what it did.”

Future plaintiffs will have to bring their cases to federal courts, in the light of the US Supreme Court decision to bar tort cases that involve medical devices, and probably prescription drugs, in state courts (BMJ 2008;336:470).

the Gaza Strip now depend on international humanitarian help, up from 63% in 2006.

The World Food Programme reported that the mean household monthly income has fallen by 22% in less than four months, between June and September 2007.

More aid is going to the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel than ever before, yet this has not offset the impact of border restrictions that amount, the charities contend, to “collective punishment against ordinary men, women, and children.”

Food prices have risen substantially, but the most acute shortages are of fuel, electricity, and spare parts for the energy infrastructure. Hospitals in the Gaza Strip have grid power cuts for 8-12 hours a day.

The number of travel permits given by Israel to Palestinians in Gaza who are seeking medical treatment abroad also declined throughout 2007. In January 2007, 89.3% of applications were approved, but by December the proportion had fallen to a record low of 64.3%.

The possession of a permit still does not guarantee passage through Israeli border checkpoints. According to monitoring by the World Health Organization, 27 permit holders were denied passage in October 2007. Twenty patients unable to access referral services died between October and December 2007.

The Israeli embassy’s spokesman Lior Ben-Dor denied that Gaza is experiencing a humanitarian crisis and said that Israel has no legal responsibility for the civilian population there since its disengagement policy was implemented two years ago.

“Nevertheless,” he added, “we don’t want to see unnecessary suffering there because we have nothing against the people of Gaza, only its government that keeps attacking us.”


Scientists consider meat pie mammography and self heating bathtubs

Oona Mashita OXFORD

Scientists who have been honoured with an Ig Nobel prize for science, awarded for work which “first makes you laugh, then makes you think,” have been touring the United Kingdom this week sharing some of their plans for the future.

The past winner Brian Witcombe, a consultant radiologist at Gloucestershire Royal NHS Foundation, showed off his latest project. “I’ll be looking at the whole field of culinary radiology, including the imaging of ingested material and radiology in the food production and retail industries.”

“I’ll be exploring the value of meat pie mammography, computed tomography of vegetables, and the cost benefit of fruit radiography,” he said.

Dr Witcombe won his Ig Nobel prize, a spoof of the Nobel prizes, for his report “Sword swallowing and its side effects” (BMJ 2006;333:1285-7). He appeared at the tour’s talks with his coauthor and professional sword swaller Dan Meyer, from Antioch, Tennessee, who demonstrated the art by swallowing a sword live on stage.

Marc Abrahams, organiser of the Ig Nobel prizes and editor of the Annals of Improbable Research, the science magazine, said that there was never a shortage of material for the prizes. He said, “We get 7000 nominations every year for the Ig Nobel awards, and between 10% and 15% of nominations are from people nominating themselves.”

Featuring in some of the shows this year is Fiona Barclay, a biochemist at the Red, Green, and Blue Company who collaborated with the US chemist Theo Gray to assemble the world’s first periodic table—a large, four legged piece of furniture that contains most of the elements of the periodic table, except those that are “overly lethal.”

Wearing a bathrobe and slippers on stage she announced that Theo Gray has been working on a self heating bathtub, using the same technology as in self heating soup, coffee, and hot chocolate, which work by pushing a button on the bottom of the can. He used large floating steel pots, filled with quicklime and water to yield temperatures of about 900°C, which then transmitted heat into the surrounding water through the thin steel walls.

Chris McManus, professor of psychology and medical education at University College London, who wrote the study “Scrotal asymmetry in man and in ancient civilization of Central America who called avocadoes “ahuacati,” which means testes because of their resemblance to the fruit when it is hanging on a tree.

This time he told audiences that he had discovered the derivation of the word avocado. The word comes from the Aztec civilization of Central America who called avocadoes “ahuacati,” which means testes because of their resemblance to the fruit when it is hanging on a tree.

Also speaking at the seminar was Jim Gundlach, professor of sociology at Auburn University, Alabama, who won the 2004 Ig Nobel prize for medicine. His research showed that states in the United States where radio stations played a lot of country music had higher suicide rates than those that didn’t (Social Forces 1992;71:211-8).

Oona Mashita