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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Today's News

Friday, October 7, 2005

Ig Nobel Prizes Honor Syrup-Swimming Tests and Prosthetic Testicles for Animals

By [SARA LIPKA](#)

It was "brute curiosity," says Edward L. Cussler Jr., that led him to fill a University of Minnesota-Twin Cities swimming pool with guar gum two years ago. The chemical-engineering professor was attempting to settle a 300-year-old question of viscosity versus velocity: Would thick syrup slow down swimmers?

For his dash, Mr. Cussler and Brian T. Gettelfinger, the student who proposed the idea, accepted the Ig Nobel Prize in Chemistry at Harvard University on Thursday -- in their swimsuits.

If the viscosity of water is doubled, they found, swimmers are just as fast (*The Chronicle*, September 19, 2003). But there is "no practical benefit to be gained from this experiment at all," says Mr. Cussler.

No matter. The 15th annual Ig Nobel Prizes -- given in 10 categories by actual Nobel laureates -- honored achievements "that first make people laugh and then make them think," according to Marc A.

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Abrahams, editor of the *Annals of Improbable Research*, the

science-humor journal that

coordinates the awards. Past prizes have paid tribute to the pink plastic flamingo, Murphy's Law, the balding men's comb-over hairstyle (which is patented), and the first scientifically recorded case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck.

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This year the Ig Nobel Board of Governors, and the random passer-by it annually recruits to join in its deliberations, considered more than 5,000 nominations. The winners received no cash, but did get a small trophy -- a palm-sized plastic pyramid inscribed with Magic Marker and with an infinity symbol, reflecting the theme of this year's ceremony, at the top. The prize categories and winners are as follows:

Agricultural history: James Watson, head of the School of History, Philosophy, and Politics at Massey University, in New Zealand, for his study "The Significance of Mr. Richard Buckley's Exploding Trousers: Reflections on an Aspect of Technological Change in New Zealand Dairy Farming Between the World Wars," which appeared in the journal *Agricultural History*. In his study Mr. Watson examined farmers' use of highly flammable sodium chlorate as an herbicide against ragwort. "I'm hoping that a re-enactment won't be required," he wrote in an e-mail message.

Biology: Yoji Hayasaka, manager of the Waite Campus Mass Spectrometry Facility at the Australian Wine Research Institute; Benjamin P. Smith, Michael J. Tyler, and Brian D. Williams, all of the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Adelaide, in Australia; Craig R. Williams, an entomologist at James Cook University, in Australia; ChemComm Enterprises, based in France; and the Firmenich perfume company, based in Switzerland, for classifying odorous secretions of 131 species of frogs when the animals were under stress. According to Mr. Smith, the study of frog skin secretions may help develop more-effective mosquito repellents.

Chemistry: Mr. Cussler and Mr. Gettelfinger, for their viscosity-versus-velocity experiment.

Economics: Gauri Nanda, who was a master's student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when she invented [Clocky](#), an alarm clock that scurries around the room as it rings, forcing the person it awakens to get out of bed and chase it. "My goal with Clocky was to approach technology in a playful way," wrote Ms. Nanda in an e-mail message.

Fluid dynamics: Victor Benno Meyer-Rochow, a professor of biology at Germany's International University Bremen, and Jozsef Gal, of Hungary's Loránd Eötvös University, for calculating the pressure that builds up inside a penguin's bowels. Mr. Meyer-Rochow and Mr. Gal did not attend the awards ceremony because they could not obtain visas to enter the United States. "Let's hope it had nothing to do with the explosive nature of our work," they said in a videotaped acceptance speech, according to Mr. Abrahams.

Literature: The "Internet entrepreneurs" of Nigeria, for their "bold series of short stories" -- in the form of spam -- about wealthy, ill-fated, but professedly generous characters in search of financial assistance.

Medicine: Gregg A. Miller, of Independence, Mo., for inventing Neuticles, prosthetic testicles for neutered animals -- cats, dogs, horses, and steers -- in various sizes and three degrees of firmness. Mr. Miller is pleased to accept the prize, "considering the fact that most thought I was nuts (pun intended) for introducing Neuticles a decade ago," he wrote in an e-mail message.

Nutrition: Yoshiro Nakamats, of Tokyo, for photographing and analyzing each meal he has consumed for 34 years (and counting). Dr. Nakamats, 77, has developed a powder, composed of 55 essential ingredients, that he says will enable people to live to 144.

Peace: Claire Rind and Peter Simmons, researchers in neuroscience at Britain's University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, for electronically monitoring the brain-cell activity of a locust while it watched selected *Star Wars* highlights.

Physics: John S. Mainstone, a visiting scholar in the history of science and technology at Australia's University of Queensland, and the late Thomas Parnell, for having conducted, since 1927, a "pitch-drop experiment," whereby a glob of congealed black tar drips through a funnel at a rate of one drop every nine years or so. The experiment can be watched live online. Its last drop fell in November 2000, according Mr. Mainstone, who does not expect the next to become "heavily pregnant" before 2010. "But who knows?" he wrote in an e-mail message.

More information about the prizes, which are "intended to celebrate the unusual, honor the imaginative, and spur people's interest in science," is posted online.

Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [Ichthyology Meets Ignominy at the Ig Nobels](#)
(10/8/2004)
- [The Other Nobels](#) (10/17/2003)

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