

not explain coherently exactly how she won. (The moral of the story is: Do not invest your method using any method unless you are prepared to lose it.)

The British *Sun* later interviewed the four-year old investing whiz and she clarified her financial philosophy: 1) Go to sleep early, 2) invest in the growing market for children's toys, and 3) money is not everything. The most important thing is sweets.

What is Laughter?

In that same year, 2001, Dr. Wiseman carried out one of the most fascinating and far-reaching studies ever undertaken. This investigation had a tremendous effect on the global media networks. The question he researched was very simple: What is the funniest joke in the world?

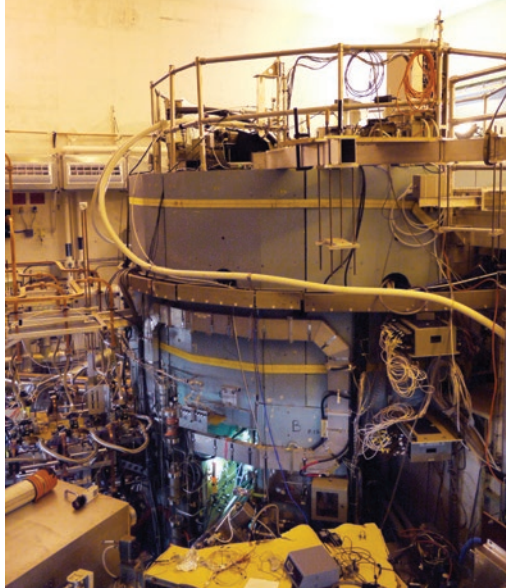
The British Science Association spent a year asking people around the world to send in jokes and evaluate those submitted by others. Over 40,000 jokes from 70 countries were collected and rated. As expected, the researchers found that a person's taste in jokes changes drastically according to the region.

They found that the English, Irish, Australians and New Zealanders prefer jokes that involve a play-on-words. Americans and Canadians laugh best at jokes that leave someone looking foolish while most of central Europe shows a preference for jokes that make light of serious topics, such as death and poverty. The study also showed that Germans laugh the most, while Canadians laugh the least. If you want to recount a joke involving a living being, your best bet is to use a duck.

So, which joke was judged the funniest?

Two hunters were crawling through the forest in search of their prey. Suddenly, one of them collapsed. He had stopped breathing and his eyes were glassy. The second hunter quickly dialed 911. "My friend just died! What should I do?"

The official at the other end



Research equipment used to perform studies, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

of the line replies calmly, "Don't worry, we'll help you. First of all, can you make sure he is really dead?"

"One second." The official hears the sound of a firearm discharging and then the voice comes back on, "Ok, now what?"

Conclusion

Despite our incredulous reactions, professors such as Drs. Trinkaus, Wiseman and others are determined to keep up their efforts to research bizarre topics. They believe it is of utmost importance to make people "laugh, and then think."

"The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not 'Eureka!' but 'That's funny...'" said Isaac Asimov, the author of 500 books on science and science fiction.

The community of researchers involved in strange-but-true (or just plain strange) studies is constantly growing, suggesting that they are not likely to disappear anytime in the near future.

So next time you see someone run a yellow light, litter your neighborhood or knowingly take home someone else's umbrella, don't get nervous. You may have chanced upon the perfect subject for the next scientific study. ■

The Ig Nobel Prize

What happens when a mayor uses a tank to destroy a vehicle parked in an illegal spot? Why does bread almost invariably fall on the buttered side? How does one make tap water dangerous to drink? Could expensive placebo medications be more effective than low-cost ones? Can we predict how long a cow will nap? These are just a few of the fields in which people have been awarded the Ig Nobel Prize, a parody of the Nobel Prizes, given each year for trivial achievements in scientific research.

Tzipi Golan

There are studies that we would not dream of glancing at were it not that someone noticed how ridiculous they are and decided to expose them in public. But who is willing to go through all these improbable research studies and find the most absurd among them?

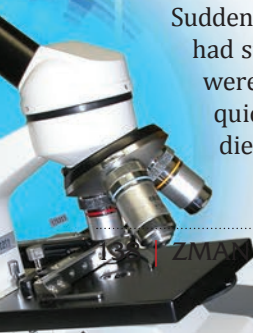
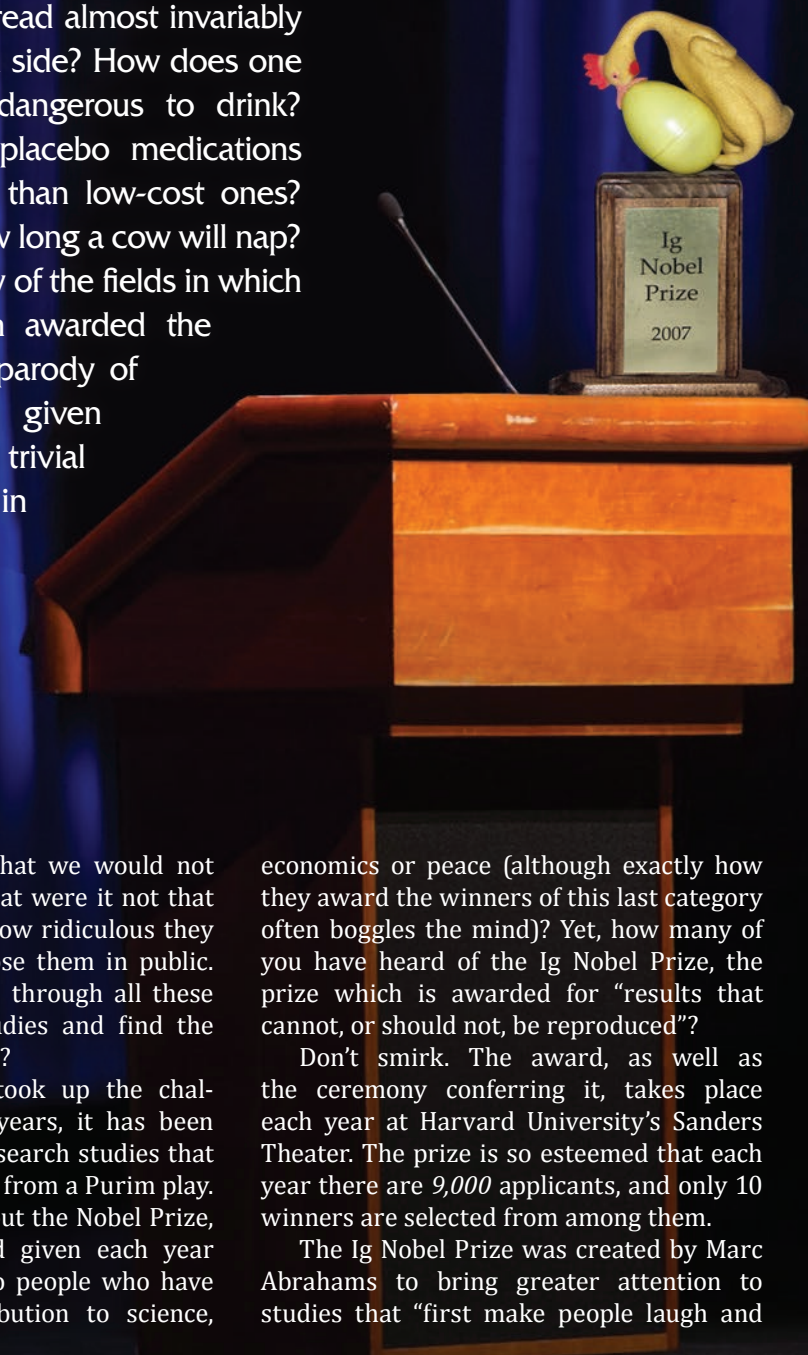
Harvard University took up the challenge. For the past 23 years, it has been conferring awards for research studies that look like they were taken from a Purim play.

Who hasn't heard about the Nobel Prize, the distinguished award given each year in Stockholm, Sweden, to people who have made a decisive contribution to science,

economics or peace (although exactly how they award the winners of this last category often boggles the mind)? Yet, how many of you have heard of the Ig Nobel Prize, the prize which is awarded for "results that cannot, or should not, be reproduced"?

Don't smirk. The award, as well as the ceremony conferring it, takes place each year at Harvard University's Sanders Theater. The prize is so esteemed that each year there are 9,000 applicants, and only 10 winners are selected from among them.

The Ig Nobel Prize was created by Marc Abrahams to bring greater attention to studies that "first make people laugh and



then make them think." Abrahams has also undertaken to poke fun at the stranger side of science through his magazine, *Annals of Improbable Research* (AIR). Since 1995, this publication appears six times a year and is dedicated to bizarre and even hilarious scientific studies. In fact, AIR is the official sponsor of the Ig Nobel Prizes.

For the past 23 years, Abrahams has maintained a panel of scientists and professors who choose the winners for each category. Interest in the offbeat ceremony on the part of the international scientific community grows from year to year. Last year, scientists from 18 countries on 5 continents were chosen for the prize and all converged on Massachusetts to receive their award in person.

Ironically, thanks to the publicity the awards generate, it encourages even respectable scientists to pursue strange studies in the hopes of winning the Ig Nobel award. Even so, most of the world's scientists feel they can do without the honor.

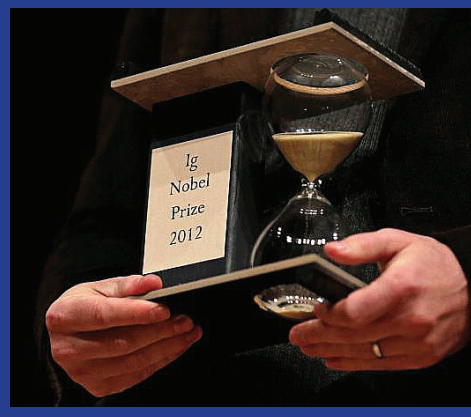
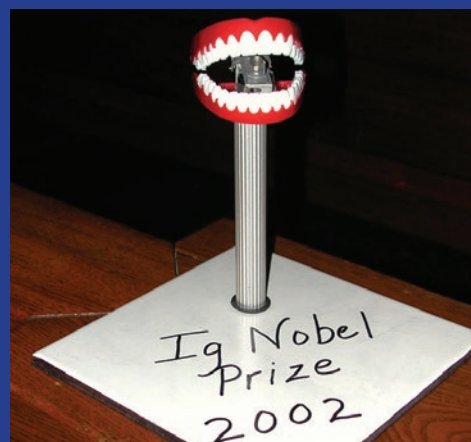
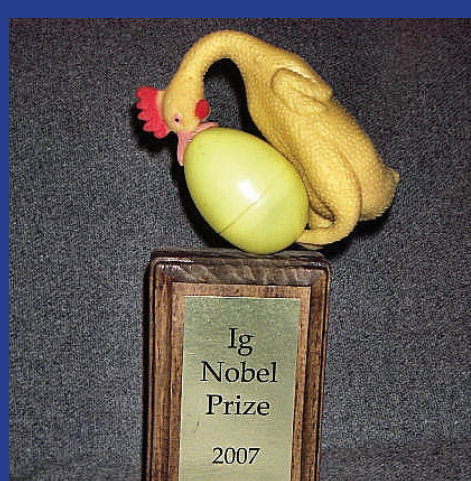
Enough of the introduction. And the winners are...

Terrorist Delivery System

Imagine the following: You are sitting in an El Al plane that is leaving Ben Gurion Airport for Denver, Colorado. Half an hour later, with the plane flying high above the clouds, the passengers around you unstrap their seats belts and the flight attendant at the end of the plane gets the cart ready to sell duty-free products. Suddenly, a shrill yell is heard: "Nobody move, this is a hijacking. All the passengers should stay in their seats to prevent unnecessary harm."

Mayhem breaks out, but the terrorist remains cool. He stands up, holding the pistol he concealed during the inspection.

While the frightened passengers listen to his instructions and one mother pushes down her son who is jumping up, one of the undercover air marshals somewhere inside the plane presses a hidden button.



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