



► Ig Nobel sets out to prove that science doesn't just have to be creative — it can be silly, too!

# At Ig Nobel, mad science wins awards

► Time for the annual Ig Nobel Prizes, celebrating silly yet original research projects ► Past winners involve gay necrophilia in ducks and side effects of sword ingestion

Some of science's wackiest discoveries will be honored tonight at the 21st annual Ig Nobel Prizes at Harvard University.

Inspired by the original Nobel awards, this ceremony recognizes genuine scientific research that might not get big bucks from big corporations but is still packed with mind-boggling originality.

Recent winners include studies on a toy helicopter that collects whale mucus, why woodpeckers don't get headaches and fellatio in fruit bats. Last year's winner in the peace category was a study confirming the widely held belief that saying bad words relieves pain.

"Believe it or not, this too is science," Richard Stephens of Keele University, lead author of 2010's winning entry "Swearing as a Response to Pain", told Metro. "We pride ourselves on communicating this to a wider public — it's not only

## The best of ...

A look back at winners through the years:

- **2010:** Asthma can be treated with a roller coaster ride
- **2008:** Role of armadillos in moving artifacts in archaeological sites
- **2007:** Sword-swallowing and its side effects
- **2003:** The first documented case of homosexual necrophilia in ducks

## Did you know?

Ig is a play on the word "ignoble" meaning baseness, lowness or meanness, and is pronounced "ig-no-bell."

about white coats in a lab."

Organizer and inventor Marc Abrahams explained to Metro how the ceremony was born: "Twenty years

ago, in 1991, I was the editor of Journal of Irreproducible Results and I was suddenly meeting people who did interesting and bizarre things. I wanted to draw attention to these people and their work."

For those budding off-beat scientists who want an Ig Nobel gong, Abrahams has one piece of advice: "You have to do something that makes you laugh at first, and then think. If you show the list of winners to three people, they will all have different opinions about which one is useful, which one is stupid."

This year's nominations are confidential, but a possible 2011 contender is a Japanese study that suggests there's no harm in refraining from teeth-clenching whilst performing mathematical tasks.



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## WHAT'S BEHIND A CURSE WORD?

Metro spoke with former winners Richard Stephens, John Atkins, and Andrew Kingston.

### What did you do?

We investigated whether swearing affects pain tolerance when immersing your hand in icy water. On average, the students in the experiment could hold their hands in the water for longer while repeating a swear word. We actually found that swearing induces a fight-or-flight response, it increases emotional arousal. Swearing is a personal thing, but they usually chose the F-word, s— or bollocks."

### What did you get from winning the award?

Well, there was no prize money. Since our study on swearing received the "Peace" prize, it was obviously ironic. But as Sigmund Freud once said, "the first human who hurled an insult instead of a stone was the founder of civilization." Also, this study has no practical usage. It can't be advocated in a health care setting.

### Anything else in the pipeline?

Next thing we are figuring out is if it generalizes to chronic pain. Another area is: How long does it last for? The effect of any stimulus finishes after a while, so if we swear, how long is the response for?