

The 2007 Ig Nobels

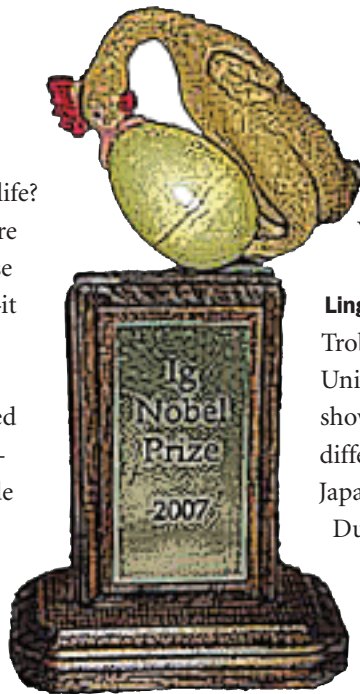
So you think those people in Research & Development have the life? Fungible deadlines, work that's more like freeform play, and a permanent excuse to occupy yourself with the impractical—it all sounds pretty interesting and unusual, doesn't it? Well, you have no idea.

At this year's Ig Nobel Awards, presented in October at Harvard University, the curtain in front of the wizard was pulled aside to offer a glimpse at R&D out on the far horizon. The following are top award-winners for 2007—really.

Medicine Brian Witcombe of Gloucester, U.K., and Dan Meyer of Antioch, Tenn., “for their penetrating medical report, ‘Sword Swallowing and Its Side Effects.’ After interviews with 46 professionals, the pair offered observations in the *British Medical Journal* such as: “Sore throats are common, particularly while the skill is being learnt.”

Biology Dr. Johanna van Bronswijk of the Netherlands won “for doing a census of all the mites, insects, spiders, pseudoscorpions, crustaceans, bacteria, algae, ferns, and fungi with whom we share our beds each night.” Ferns!? Her paper was “Huis, Bed en Beestjes,” and her lecture series abstract was “A Bed Ecosystem.”

Chemistry Mayu Yamamoto of the International Medical Center of Japan was cited “for developing a way to extract vanillin—vanilla fragrance and flavoring—from cow dung.” For the event, Cambridge's own Toscanini's



Ice Cream shop invented a new flavor in honor of the good doctor—Yum-a-Moto Vanilla Twist.

Linguistics Juan Manuel Toro, Josep Trobalon, and Núria Sebastian-Gallés of the University of Barcelona won an Ig Nobel “for showing that rats sometimes cannot tell the difference between a person speaking Japanese backwards and a person speaking Dutch backwards.” Sometimes?

Economics Kuo Cheng Hsieh of Tawain was awarded “for patenting a device that catches bank robbers by dropping a net over them.” Didn't Walter Lanz Studios perfect this technique years ago?

Aviation Patricia Agostino, Santiago Plano, and Diego Golumbil of the National University of Quilmes, Argentina, “for their discovery that Viagra aids jetlag recovery in hamsters.” Are jetlagged hamsters a problem, and how would you know your hamster is affected? Better yet, just how would you ask for the prescription to help the little guy out of his temporal disorientation?

Looks like those guys down at the end of the hall are having more fun than we thought. And they're winning international awards for their efforts.

For the skeptical, you can check out links to the academic papers and events tied to these awards at www.improbable.com.