Scientists with funny bones

Ig Nobel prizes: Awards showcase humorous side of research

By Carolyn Y. Johnson
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CAMBRIDGE - The winners are in: The chemistry prize goes to scientists who researched Coca-Cola's potential to kill sperm. The biology award is for research proving that fleas on dogs jump higher than fleas on cats; and the prize for medicine goes to the enterprising economist who found that expensive fake pills work better than cheap ones.

Those awards and seven others were handed out last night at the 18th annual Ig Nobel prizes, an irreverent event that showcases the humorous side of science.

The event, held a few days before the real Nobel Prize announcements start, was also a reminder that science, often seen as important but impenetrable to people without a PhD, is fundamentally about understanding the world. There is room in the discipline for probing cellular mechanisms and building an obstacle course for fleas to better understand and control them.

"A lot of people have the impression that anything to do with science is a very somber thing - so serious it has to be somber," said Marc Abrahams, editor of the science humor magazine Annals of Improbable Research, which holds the event at Harvard's Sanders Theatre. "Most scientists would feel that's not really what life is like for them."

Benoît Mandelbrot, 83, a revered mathematician who invented fractal geometry, put it this way in an e-mail: "Scientists accept a life that is extremely constrained and often filled with strife. But many are very human and treasure the rare nice occasions to act as silly kids." Mandelbrot's contribution to this year's Ig Nobels? He was to be the prize in the award's win-a-date contest.

The Ig Nobels ham it up to the extreme. When speeches go on for more than a minute, an 8-year-old named Miss Sweetie Poo is there to declare "Please stop. I'm bored," and usher the garrulous prize-winners off the stage.

But the prizes are awarded to scientists for actual work they have done, not planned comedic stunts.

"I've won quite a lot of academic awards; I can't think of one that makes me happier than this one," said Dan Ariely, a Duke University economist and author of the book "Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape our
Decisions," who said his deserving work has been passed over year after year. Ariely's Ig Nobel-winning work demonstrates the secret behind many of his fellow laureates: That hidden in the humorous work is a legitimate scientific point.

Ariely recruited volunteers for a study and printed brochures describing an invented painkiller that was actually just a placebo. Some were told the drug was expensive; others were told it was cheap.

The subjects were given electric shocks before and after they took the pill. Those who got the pricey fake medicine reported a bigger reduction in pain than those with the cheaper fake.

Ariely's experiment, which appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association, suggested that price and marketing of a drug may play a role in its effects. Others noted that while their work may seem wacky to outsiders, it isn't all that different from normal work in their field.

Aristolfo Gomes de Mello Araujo, a Brazilian archeologist, won a prize for his work examining the effects of an armadillo burrowing at an archeological site. He said in a written note that he was pleased to win the Ig Nobel, but "it was also kind of a surprise, since our work does not depart so much from experimental archeology done by colleagues."

Others received the prize for work that deviates from their usual research. Deborah J. Anderson, a professor at Boston University School of Medicine who studies HIV, shared the chemistry prize for work she did in the 1980s showing the efficacy of various formulations of Coke as a spermicide. Anderson's lab found Diet Coke was most effective at stopping sperm, but cautioned that it wasn't an effective way to stop pregnancies. (She said that for years after her work was published as a letter in the New England Journal of Medicine, she would find copies of the article taped to soda machines on college campuses she visited.)

Other prizes ranged from studies on the effect the sound of crunching has on the perception of the crispiness of a Pringle, to an examination of the tips that professional lap dancers earn.

David Sims took home the literature prize for his study, "You Bastard: A Narrative Exploration of the Experience of Indignation within Organizations."

Sims, a professor of organizational behavior at the Cass Business School in London, grappled with the little-studied, but very familiar, experience of feeling perturbed at work.

"The whole notion behind it - make people laugh and then make them think - is such a core part of the whole educational learning process," Sims said. "What a good idea to have people in the scientific community having a bit of humor about what they're doing."

Carolyn Y. Johnson can be reached at cjohnson@globe.com.

The Ig Nobel informal lectures will take place Saturday at 1 p.m. on the MIT campus.  

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