

Ignoble Nobel Prizes 2021

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THE very title “Ignoble Nobel Prizes” or Ig Nobel Prizes, may raise many eyebrows. However, these are considered as the parodies of the Nobel Prizes and are given out every year in September; in the current year on the 9th of the month.

The Ig Nobel Prizes were created in 1991 by Marc Abrahams, the editor and co-founder of the scientific humour magazine the *Annals of Improbable Research*. They aim at “honouring the achievements that first make people laugh and then make them think”. Every year, the prizes are awarded in a ceremony held at the Harvard University’s Sanders Theater and the categories include not only those in which the Nobel Prizes are awarded but also in other categories like public health, engineering, biology and various inter-disciplinary research. The awards are sometimes criticisms *via* satire, but often draw attention to scientific achievements that have some humorous or unexpected aspects. Examples range from the discovery that the presence of humans tends to sexually arouse ostriches, to the statement that black holes fulfil all the requirements for being the locations of Hell, to research on the “five-second rule” which believes that food dropped on the floor will not be contaminated if it is picked up within five seconds.

The Prizes, co-sponsored by the Harvard Computer Society, the Harvard-Redcliffe Science Fiction Association and the Harvard-Redcliffe Society of Physics Students, are presented by genuine Nobel laureates at a ceremony. It is usually observed in an atmosphere of jokes and humour and is followed by the winners’ public lectures at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, for the last two years (2020 and 2021), the ceremonies have been conducted online, because of the COVID-19 epidemic, which has brought some changes in the manner of the celebration.



Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony-2021

The Ig Nobel Prizes are recognised to have a “noble side”, because although the awards are viewed as a recognition of trivial research, history shows that they often have led to quite important breakthroughs. The achievements based on which the current year’s Prizes (the 31st) have been awarded bear testimony to that.

The Biology Prize of the year (2021) has gone to Susanne Schotz of the Lund University, Sweden, for extensively analysing variations in the purring, chirping, chattering, trilling, murmuring, howling, growling and other modes of cat-human communication. She has been hard at the work cracking the “Cat code” with her collaborators since 2011, handing the microphones to cats to analyse what felines mean



The Secret language of cats

when they mew and authored a book “*The Secret Language of Cats*” in which these have been vividly described.

Similarly, the Ecology Prize has been shared by Manuel Porcar of the University of Valencia, Spain and colleagues. They have been awarded for using genetic analysis to identify the different species of bacteria that reside in wads of discarded chewing gum stuck on pavements in various countries like France, Greece, Singapore, Spain and Turkey.



Chewing gum collection

Jonathan Willams, an atmospheric chemist at the Max Planck Institute of Chemistry along with his associates Jorg Wicker and Nicolas Krauter of Germany and others have been jointly awarded the Chemistry Prize for chemically analysing air inside movie theatres to test the odours produced

by audiences to reliably indicate the effects of violence, sex, humour, suspicious, antisocial behaviour, drug use and bad language in the movie they are watching. Among other results, they found isoprene levels varied enormously during scary movies. According to them, human beings broadcast signals depending on various emotional states so their bodies release different chemicals i.e. odours.

The Economics Prize has been cornered by Pavlo Blavatsky, a professor of the Montpellier Business School of France. He used a computer vision algorithm and photos for discovering that the obesity of a country’s politicians may be a good indicator of that country’s corruption. According to his studies, there is a strong correlation between the two.



Correlation between obesity and corruption

Olcay Cem Bulut, a professor at the SKL Clinic in Heilbronn, Germany, and his associates have been honoured with the Prize in Medicine for demonstrating that sexual orgasms can be as effective as decongestant medicines at improving nasal breathing. Having developed suspicions based on “self-observations” about it, Bulut recruited a group of co-workers to investigate. The couples were trained with a device to measure their nasal inflow before sex, immediately after sexual climax and regular time points thereafter. It was found that sex was very likely to be effective at clearing blocked noses, for an hour at least, as any commercial decongestants.



Sex and nose block

The Peace Prize has been awarded to David Carrier, a professor of Biology at the University of Utah, USA, and two others Ethan Bersis and Steven Naleway, for testing the hypothesis that humans evolved beards to protect themselves from punches to the face. It goes against what Charles Darwin suspected — beards evolved “as an ornament to charm or excite the opposite sex”. According to Carrier and his associates although “those don’t provide a lot of protection to a really strong punch, but can act as an obscuring making jaw harder to target in a fistfight”.

The Physics Prize has been shared among Alessandro Corbetta of the Eindhoven University of Technology, Netherlands, and his associates for their study of pedestrian dynamics in a train station. By analysing several million pedestrians’ trajectories, they found that crowd movement can be understood by assuming “social forces” that help prevent people from running into each other. On the contrary, the Kinetic Prize has gone to Hisashi Murakami of Kyoto Institute of Technology, Japan, for the opposite observations that sometimes pedestrians do collide with others. The cellphone may be the reason, but pedestrians without cellphone also have difficulty in navigating through the crowd. He and his associates have discovered that mutual anticipation facilitates the orderly movement in the human crowd and the lack of it can cause collisions.

A new method of cockroach control on submarines has earned the Entomology Prize for John Mulrennan Jr, a retired officer of the US Navy along with three others of his country. They eradicated the pest on submarine with highly potent organophosphate pesticides called dichlorvos after ethylene oxide gas previously used made someone sick.

Similarly, the determination by experiment whether it is safer to transport an airborne rhinoceros upside-down has brought the Transportation Prize to Robin Radcliffe of Namibia and his associates. They have found that airlifting tranquillized rhinoceros upside down is probably better for them than carrying them on their sides in slings. The technique has been vital to conservationists who move large animals such as rhinoceros and elephants to keep them safe from poachers or to maintain genetic diversity.



Air Lifting Rhinoceros Upside-down

Every year, the proceedings of the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony are recorded and broadcast on National Public Radio in the USA and is shown live on the internet. A talk of the laureates is conducted in the United Kingdom as an annual part of the National Science Week. It is also sometimes extended to Australia and some other European countries. Recently, two books have been published with the write-ups of some winners.

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