

Talk of the Town

"All higher humor begins with ceasing to take oneself seriously."

— Herman Hesse

DR. FRANCIS FESMIRE is a brilliant man. The Chattanooga native graduated from Baylor in 1978, Harvard University in 1981 and Vanderbilt School of Medicine in 1985. He's an emergency physician who specializes in heart-related emergencies, serves as director of Erlanger Hospital's Emergency Heart Center and is an associate professor of medicine with the University of Tennessee College of Medicine.

When he received the news last month that he was the recipient of the 2006 Ig Nobel Award for Medicine, he was perplexed. Like most of us, he had never heard of the "Ig" award. But he was about to find out. He learned the award was given to him for developing a "unique" cure for a medical problem.

The problem? Hiccups. The cure: read on.

"I have published over 50 papers in medical literature, and the very first thing I published, in 1988, was a case report entitled 'Termination of Intractable Hiccups with Digital Rectal Massage.' Real Nobel Prize winners usually win the award for research they did years before as the significance of their research was not evident at the time. I think it is appropriate that my award is from something years ago that I had even forgotten about," he said.

The event, though a parody, genuinely honors those who have done "unique and quirky research," Dr. Fesmire said, noting that Nobel Prize winner **Frank Wilczek** said the award is presented to those who "think out of the box." Mr. Wilczek was one of several Nobel Prize winners at the event.

More than 1,200 people attended the ceremony at the Harvard Sanders Theatre at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., Dr. Fesmire said.

"The (Ig Nobel) winners are allowed 60 seconds to give their acceptance speech. At the end of this time, Miss Sweetie Poo (a girl who is hired when she is 8 and fired when she

turns 9) comes out on stage and starts saying over and over, 'Please stop, I'm bored' until the speaker gives up," he said.

Dr. Fesmire's son, **Hunter**, a fifth-grader at Bright School, accompanied his dad to the ceremony.

"(Hunter) missed two days of school, but met six Nobel Prize winners, toured Harvard and all the Boston sites," Dr. Fesmire said. "Hunter had the nerve to ask two Nobel Prize winners if they knew how to make good stink bombs."

"They said they knew how to make really good stink bombs," Hunter said.

Hunter said he enjoyed going to the award ceremony.

"I think it is really cool and funny that my dad won it," he said. "My favorite part of going was going to the Ig Nobel Awards and meeting real Nobel Prize winners — hardly anyone gets to meet real Nobel Prize winners. I also liked the Freedom Trail and going onto the USS Constitution."

The Fesmires also met Nobel Laureates **Roy Glauber** (physics, 2005), **Dudley Herschbach** (chemistry, 1986), **Richard Roberts** (medicine, 1993), **William Lipscomb** (chemistry, 1976) and **Richard Schrock** (chemistry, 2005).

"The neatest Ig Nobel Prize winner we met was Don Featherstone, who invented the famous Pink Flamingo 49 years ago," Dr. Fesmire said. "You may have read in the paper last week that the company that makes the Pink Flamingo closed. Don currently is negotiating with four companies who have expressed an interest in buying the molds."

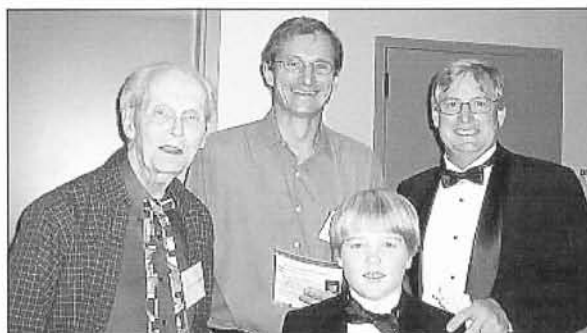
Dr. Fesmire said he was contacted last April about winning the award.

"I have not the slightest clue how the Ig Nobel folks found out about me," he said. "I was contacted last April by e-mail by **Mark Abrahams** about 'one of your earlier research studies.' I did a quick Google search on Mark Abrahams and found him on the Web site



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Dr. Francis Fesmire is heckled on stage by a young girl playing the role of Miss Sweetie Poo during the recent Ig Nobel Prize ceremony.



Ig Nobel Laureate in medicine Dr. Francis Fesmire, right, and 11-year old son, Hunter, with, from left, Nobel Laureates William Lipscomb (chemistry, 1976) and Richard Schrock (chemistry, 2005).

entitled 'Improbable Research.' I e-mailed Mark a message that said, 'Please tell me this does not have anything to do with intractable hiccups. He e-mailed me back and said, 'Well, in fact, it does.'"

Because of the nature of this cure for hiccups, Dr. Fesmire debated about participating in the event.

"In Chattanooga, hardly anybody knows about the cardiac research I have been performing over the last 15 years. I have published over 50 papers and have been invited to lecture all over the United States, Canada, London, Stockholm, Amsterdam and Santiago, Chile. After pondering the issue, I decided it would be a blast and called Mark by phone. He offered me the award, and the rest was history."

Ig Nobel is word play on "ignoble," he said.

"I don't think Mark Abrahams wants you to take the meaning of Ig Nobel as dishon-

orable, but more as infamous. As Mark Abrahams states on his Web site and in the introduction to his books, the single criterion for winning an Ig Nobel award is 'something that first makes people laugh and then think.'"

Today, Dr. Fesmire has been given a lifetime invitation to participate in the Ig Nobel ceremony.

"Next year, I plan on taking (son) Forrest," he said.

And what was wife Connie's reaction to her husband's new badge of distinction?

"Shock and disbelief," Dr. Fesmire said.

The awards started in 1991, and 10 are awarded each year.

For detailed information on Dr. Fesmire's cure for the hiccups, visit <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn10207-ig-nobel-prizes-hail-digital-rectal-massage.html>.

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Town Talk

