

Inventors of “gay bomb” and *BMJ* authors win Ig Nobel prizes



THE NEWS/ALAMY

Study into perils of sword swallowing reaps award

Jeanne Lenzer BOSTON

A novel weapon under investigation by the US Air Force has won this year's Ig Nobel peace prize. The Ig Nobel awards, given for science that “first makes you laugh, then makes you think,” were given to recipients from five continents by six winners of the actual Nobel prize last week at Harvard University.

The unusual weapon, confirmed by Pentagon sources, is a “gay bomb” (<http://blog.washingtonpost.com/offbeat>, 12 Jun, “Sunshine project uncovers US military ‘gay bomb’”). The project, which officials say has now been scrapped, was to come up with a device to release unspecified hormones that could be absorbed through the skin or lungs, thereby incapacitating soldiers who—according to the plan—would be too busy swooning over each other in homosexual ecstasy to waste any time dashing about planting roadside bombs.

The Pentagon did not respond to inquiries

from the *BMJ* about possible future plans for its “make love not war” initiative.

Brian Witcombe, a consultant radiologist from Gloucester, won this year's Ig Nobel medicine prize for his article in the *BMJ*, “Sword swallowing and its side effects” (*BMJ* 2006;333:1285-7). Dr Witcombe said: “I was interested in swallowing disorders.”

He accepted the prize jointly with his coauthor, Dan Meyer, a sword swallower from Antioch, Tennessee, who swallowed a 60 cm sword before an awestruck audience at the ceremony. Dr Witcombe said he was surprised that sword swallowers use real, not trick, swords.

The biology prize went to Johanna van Bronswijk, of the Eindhoven University of Technology, the Netherlands, 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.”

The erectile dysfunction drug sildenafil (Viagra) made its first showing at this year's Ig Nobel ceremony. Patricia Agostino and her colleagues at the Department of Science and Technology at the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Argentina, found that sildenafil can alleviate symptoms related to jet lag—in hamsters. In an interview with the *BMJ* Dr Agostino's colleague, Diego Golombek responded to concerns that the erectile side effects of the drug might lead pilots to reach for the wrong joy stick. Dr Golombek said that although his team had yet to conduct clinical trials in humans, he believed that sildenafil might enhance safety in the air, not detract from it, as the drug “speeds up production of cyclic GMP [guanosine monophosphate], allowing faster re-entrainment of circadian rhythms,” so pilots would not be jet lagged.

Government backs down on merger of regulatory bodies

Adrian O'Dowd LONDON

The government has decided not to merge the United Kingdom's two regulatory bodies in the field of human reproduction and embryo research. But it gave approval for the creation of human-animal embryos (“inter-species embryos”) for the purposes of research into disease, with the agreement of the regulator.

The Department of Health's previous proposal to merge the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) and the Human Tissue Authority (HTA) has been formally dropped.

The decision was announced as part of the government's formal response last week to a report published in August by a committee (representing both houses of Parliament) that scrutinised the draft bill on human tissues and embryos (*BMJ* 2007;335:224-5, 4 Aug).

The public health minister, Dawn Primarolo, said there was now a clear way forward for the draft bill, which represented a major overhaul of the law on assisted human reproduction and embryo research. The bill is likely to be included in the Queen's Speech next month.

Ms Primarolo said the idea to merge the HFEA and the HTA to become a new Regulatory Authority for Tissue and Embryos had been dropped after consultation with stakeholders.

“This bill will allow legitimate medical and scientific use of human reproductive technologies for research to flourish in this country, while giving the public confidence that they are being used and developed sensibly with appropriate controls in place,” she said.

The government's response is available at the publications and statistics section of www.dh.gov.uk.

opposition to the decision began to emerge among public health researchers in Europe. Beginning with the Institut Curie, Paris Public Hospitals, and the Institut Gustave-Roussy, near Paris, it soon included genetics societies, Greenpeace, and the Dutch and Austrian health ministries.

Critics feared that the patent's wide ranging nature would give Myriad Genetics a monopoly in a key area of research and would force European

laboratories to send DNA samples from patients who are considered to be at risk of the cancers to the company's testing facilities in Salt Lake City.

Not only would European researchers be open to legal attack if they failed to comply, but the arrangements, argues the Institut Curie, would have enabled the company to build up the world's sole genetic data bank.

For more see www.epo.org.



Scientists at the Institut Curie in Paris test for the BRCA1 gene