

nature

Why the super-fun Ig Nobel prizes bring serious value to science

Awards that celebrate humour, curiosity and irreverence are a balm in hard times.

Hands up if you've been to a science awards ceremony. Black tie, fine dining, long speeches and polite applause. Any humour has to be calibrated carefully.

Compare this with the Ig Nobel awards. These also celebrate genuine, published research but, in the words of the organizers, science that makes you laugh, then makes you think. The event is part circus, part opera and part improvised comedy. Now in its 36th year, this year's event, which was held on 3 September and had a fungus theme, included favourites such as the customary deluge of paper aeroplanes at the start and strict 60-second time limits for acceptance speeches – enforced by science leaders dressed as bananas.

Before TikTok and YouTube shorts, the Ig Nobels pioneered '24/7 lectures' in which presenters – such as Fields-Medal-winning Italian mathematician Alessio Figalli – explain a concept twice: once in 24 seconds, and then in just 7 words that anyone can understand.

But this year, for the first time, the Ig Nobels were held outside the United States. The country "has become unsafe for our guests to visit", Ig Nobels founder, Marc Abrahams, announced in March.

Prizes are awarded in many of the same categories as the original Nobels. The medicine prize went posthumously to the Japanese respiratory physiologist Tokuji Unno for a study on the aerodynamics of nose-blowing¹. The economics prize went to researchers who investigated whether richer people were more likely than poorer people to take sweets from a jar intended for children (answer: they were)². The peace prize was won by a team that found that people value friends who are nice but also those who are vicious towards their enemies³.

Not every Ig Nobel mirrors a real Nobel, however: a citizen-science project that recruited people to bury hundreds of pairs of underpants to study soil health took the soil-science prize⁴. But the prizes are all handed out by actual Nobel laureates, who sometimes receive gifts in return, including autographed pairs of the aforementioned underpants.

At a time when some say that science is getting less disruptive, the prizes rightly celebrate playfulness. Physicist Andre Geim – still the only scientist to have won both an



Researcher Miki Takahara accepts an Ig Nobel on behalf of the late Tokuji Unno.

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Ig Nobel and Nobel prize for their research^{5,6} – said in an interview around a decade ago that many scientists are trapped in "a railway from your scientific cradle to your scientific coffin, one which is absolutely straight and where diversions are not allowed".

The Ig Nobels are an "unabashedly nerdy celebration of what makes science so much fun: finding things out", *Nature's* reporter at the ceremony wrote in the *Nature Briefing* on 4 September. "After the last paper aeroplane was flown and the final, fungi-themed opera was sung, many post-event conversations turned to the difficulties facing scientists around the world," our reporter noted, adding that "in hard times, a sense of humour is a survival skill".

The prize will stay in Europe for the foreseeable future, alternating between this year's host Zurich in Switzerland and a different city. During this year's ceremony, representatives from next year's host city, Antwerp in Belgium, came dressed as the national symbols of *frites* and beer. They joked that Belgium itself mirrors the tongue-in-cheek description of the Ig Nobels, calling it a country that "first makes you laugh, then makes you think".

The Ig Nobels are irreverent and often surreal, not unlike a lot of laboratory humour. They radiate a love for scientific knowledge while simultaneously sticking pins into academic hierarchies. Such light-hearted self-deprecation is key to why the Ig Nobels still feel fresh in their fourth decade. The ceremony is where science is celebrated, researchers are respected and the pursuit of prestige for its own sake has no place. Scientists need such camaraderie and mutual support now more than ever.

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