

Laugh First, Think Later

What do the following have in common? Scientists that tested what shouting and cursing does to your driving; learning that cannibalism is not very nutritional; and that human saliva is a good cleaning product. These are all results of scientific research that have won prizes at the recent Ig Nobel Prize ceremony.

10 Parody prize

The Ig Nobel Prize is a parody of the prestigious Nobel Prize. In 1991, Marc Abrahams, editor of the humoristic science magazine called *Annals of*

15 *Improbable Research*, created these awards for discoveries “that cannot, or should not, be reproduced”. Since then, each year, ten prizes are awarded for “absurd” research in fields, such as
20 physics, chemistry, literature and peace.

Prize ceremony

The 28th annual Ig Nobel Prize ceremony was held this September, as always, at Harvard University in the USA. This year’s
25 theme was ‘the heart’, and as such the prize this year was in the form of a heart.

Abrahams, as he has done since the first ceremony, was the master of ceremonies. The ceremony was filled with the usual
30 humorous traditions.

Silly traditions

Firstly, when a prize is handed out, the acceptance speech may only last a minute. If it exceeds that amount of time,
35 an 8-year-old girl, known as Miss Sweetie Poo, loudly cries out: “Please stop: I’m bored”. The audience is invited to fold paper airplanes from their programme and fly them at the stage. The prize



Photo: C.J. Gunther, ANP

40 money is a \$10 trillion dollar bill – unfortunately in Zimbabwe dollars which is the equivalent of a few US cents. The ceremony is traditionally closed with the words: “If you didn’t win this year – and
45 especially if you did – better luck next year”. The show can be followed live on internet.

Prize winners

The Ig Nobel Prize for medicine went to a
50 researcher who discovered that riding on a roller coaster can help remove kidney stones. The best roller coaster ride seems to be Disney’s *Big Thunder Mountain* because it goes up and down, and side to
55 side, helping move the kidney stones so that they just pop out! The biology prize went to scientists that showed that wine experts can identify, just by smell, a fly in a glass of wine.

60 Monkey see, monkey do

Yet, some research that may seem
ridiculous at first, can lead to important breakthroughs. In *Apenheul*, in the Netherlands, scientists studied how
65 chimpanzees imitated the visitors. The results showed that imitation is not always about learning, but it is just a form of being social. That is why these awards make you laugh first and think later.

Sources: Volkskrant ; www.en.wikipedia.org;
www.sciencemag.org; www.bbc.co.uk;