

ing soil moisture and temperature from space. Although BARC has a small emergency fund, the money needed to recover from the tornado must come from Congress, now completing work on the agriculture department's 2002 budget. —ROBERT KOENIG

SCIENTIFIC PRIZES

Researchers Accept Not-So-Nobel Awards

BOSTON—While eminent scientists were heading to Sweden to accept their coveted awards (see p. 288), lesser known colleagues were celebrating a very different honor: the Ig Nobel Prize. For boldly tackling research topics such as why shower curtains billow inward, a select group from six countries and four continents was inducted into the scientific pantheon of ignominy at a raucous 4 October ceremony at Harvard University.

Four genuine Nobel laureates were on hand to present the awards—in the form of a plaque framed by a cell phone and two cans connected by string. The 11th annual send-up of the more staid Stockholm event featured a brief opera as well as what organizer Marc Abrahams described as “the world’s most scientific wedding ceremony.” Senior researchers also were invited to describe their field in 24 seconds and then in seven words. For her discipline, Smith College professor Dany Adams summarized: “If it can get infected, it’s biology.” Among the so-called winners:

Medicine. Peter Barss of Montreal’s McGill University for his report on injuries due to falling coconuts. Barss explained that his Papua New Guinea research concluded that the worst injuries occur to individuals asleep beneath coconut trees.

Physics. David Schmidt of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for his work on why shower curtains billow inward. He told the audience that the value of such research, for which he received no outside support, lies in its immediacy to anyone who showers.

Biology. Inventor Buck Weimer of Pueblo, Colorado, for Under-Ease, airtight underwear that includes a replaceable charcoal filter to remove gases. He presented samples to the wedding couple and the Nobel laureates.

Economics. Joel Slemrod of the University of Michigan Business School in Ann Arbor and Wojciech Kopczuk of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, for their research on the way estate taxes influence a person’s time of death. Their work, said Slemrod, proves that “the pursuit of science, even social science, can be fun.”

Psychology. Lawrence Sherman of Miami University of Ohio for his ecological study of glee in small groups of preschool children. Sherman noted that the paper published in *Child Development* in 1975 has garnered 120 citations. “And it’s better to be used than not used at all,” he added.

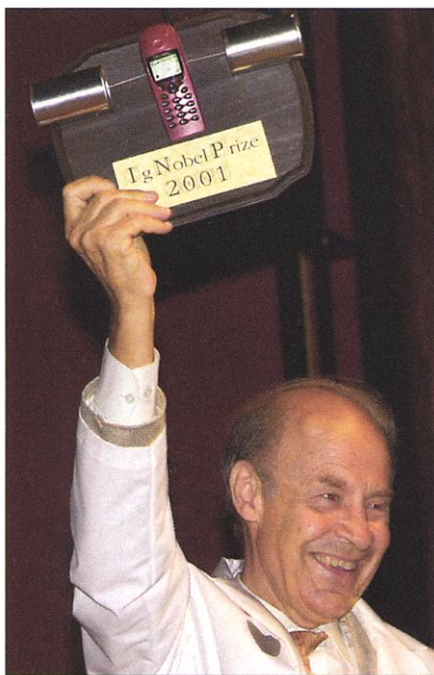
Astrophysics. MIT physicist Walter Lewin accepted the award on behalf of Michigan evangelists Jack and Rexella Van Impe, for their discovery that black holes fit all the technical characteristics of hell. Lewin demurred, however, noting that for astrophysicists, “black holes are heaven.”

Technology. John Keogh of Hawthorn, Australia, for his successful patenting of

the wheel in that country earlier this year. By audiotape, Keogh explained that he wanted to expose the absurdity of Australia’s patent system; his patent indeed won worldwide attention.

The event, presided over by the king and queen of Swedish meatballs, included a win-a-date-with-a-Nobel contest; the lucky winner gets to go out with Harvard chemist Dudley Herschbach, described as enjoying “collision theory and football.” The ceremony concluded with the 60-second no-nonsense wedding of Lisa Danielson and Will Stefanov, two geologists from Arizona State University in Tempe. Abrahams, who edits the *Annals of Improbable Research*, then thanked participants, noting that “if you didn’t win an Ig Nobel prize tonight—and especially if you did—better luck next year.”

—ANDREW LAWLER



The Un Laurel. Harvard chemist and Nobelist Dudley Herschbach displays an Ig Nobel Prize before awarding it at last week’s ceremony.

ScienceScope

Science Posts The White House is said to be close to naming nominees for top posts at two federal science agencies. Veterinarian and pharmacologist Lester Crawford is rumored to be in line to head the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Crawford has held posts at FDA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture and currently runs a food policy center at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg. His nomination may draw opposition from some consumer activists because his center has received funding from industry groups.

Less controversial is the apparent pick to head the Office of Research and Development (ORD) at the Environmental Protection Agency. Paul Gilman, now policy director at Celera Genomics in Rockville, Maryland, is an ecologist and evolutionary biologist by training whose career path includes a stint as an aide to Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM) and posts at the Department of Energy, the White House Office of Management and Budget, and the National Academy of Sciences. With that wealth of experience, Gilman would make “an excellent choice,” says Robert Huggett, a former ORD head who is now vice president for research at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

Conflict Crackdown Leaders of the top U.S. research universities have recommended some tough new rules for managing conflicts of interest. Noting that academia is facing a “substantial” risk of seeing its integrity questioned due to entanglements with industry, the Association of American Universities (AAU) on 9 October called on its 63 members to require researchers to make financial disclosures that go far beyond current legal requirements.

An AAU task force, co-chaired by presidents Steven Sample of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and L. Dennis Smith of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, says that all members of the faculty doing research—not just biomedical scientists—should disclose to university managers any financial holdings that could be “related” to their studies. Academics should also open their books to journal editors, the panel says, while the “publications should print this information so that it can become available to the public.” At medical centers, the AAU says that the Institutional Review Boards that approve human subjects research should have authority to “prohibit the research” if a conflict is not properly managed.

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