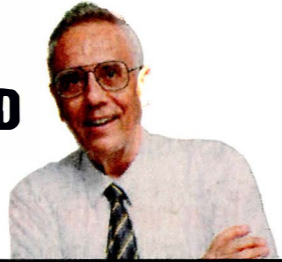


THE
LAST WORD



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Geniuses don't have to bore people



Classified AR

Download *The Straits Times Classified AR*, point it at Dr Haverkamp's picture and be treated to a cute and hilarious video on the best of Miss Sweetie Poo!

Every October, winners of the Nobel Prizes are announced in Sweden and Norway. Six prizes are given in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, peace and economics.

They have been given since 1895 when the prize was created by the great Swedish inventor, Alfred Nobel who invented gunpowder.

Toward the end of his life, he became concerned about the harm his invention might cause and so he left 95 per cent of his fortune to his Nobel Prizes for the advancement of mankind. His fortune has grown and today it pays about S\$1.5 million for each prize category.

In September, about one month before the prestigious Nobel prizes are announced in Sweden, the Ig Nobel prizes are given out by the humour magazine, "The Annals of Improbable Research" in a gala ceremony in Harvard's Sanders Theatre. It is well-attended by 1,100 spectators who watch the winners step forward to accept their Prizes which are physically handed out by genuinely bemused genuine Nobel Laureates.

Although called "improbable research", the 10 prizes given yearly are for genuine research, and the distinguished scientists who did it show up yearly to give a 5-minute talk explaining their research. After that, they give a series of 24/7 lectures at which they explain their research twice: First, a complete technical description in 24 seconds and then a clear summary that anyone can understand in 7 words.

Guaranteeing that the prize recipients

stay within their time allotment is Miss Sweetie Poo who is a little girl of 8 to 10 years, chosen yearly for her cuteness.

When the prize recipient goes beyond the allotted time, which usually happens, Miss Sweetie Poo rushes up to the stage and says loudly, "Please stop. I'm bored. Please stop. I'm bored." She repeats this until the speaker stops talking, which is almost instantly.

The Ig Nobel awards are bestowed to a prestigious group of academics, some of which have won Nobel prizes themselves. An example is University of Manchester's Andrei Geim, who won an Ig Nobel prize for his work with levitating frogs and then shared the 2010 Nobel Prize in physics for his work with graphene.

By the way, the invitation to the Harvard event is also amusing, first in its announced dress code which says: "We suggest you wear clothes."

After that it recommends bringing lots of paper, which is standard for note-taking at academic seminars, but the invitation card says: "This is for making paper airplanes. There will be designated airplane-throwing periods at the beginning and the midway points of the ceremonies."

All the details of the Ig Nobels are at <http://www.improbable.com/ig/2014/>

The Ig Nobel prize has been awarded since 1997, so they cover 18 years of research with 10 prizes awarded each year. I have reviewed them all and here are the eight I found funniest. (I started with 11 but cut it back to 8 since nearly everyone tells me that is a lucky number.)

1. **Economics** (a favourite since it is my profession). The Italian government's National Institute of Statistics, for proudly taking the lead in fulfilling the European Union mandate requiring each of the 28 countries to increase the official size of their national economy by including revenues from prostitution and other unlawful financial transactions. Italy found that this indeed boosted its GDP.

2. **Ethics and engineering.** The authors' plan is to engineer a shorter, smaller human race to cope with climate change since smaller people consume fewer natural resources. The study has three engineers: S Matthew Liao, a professor of bioethics at New York University, Anders Sandberg and Rebecca Roache who are fellows studying ethics at the University of Oxford. The trio launched their "be-littler" idea in 2012 with a paper titled, "Human engineering and climate change" in the journal: Ethics, Policy and Environment.

3. **Medicine.** Who knows? This may eventually result in reconsideration of Singapore's ban on chewing gum. A project called "The Effects of Gum Chewing on Math Scores in Adolescents" studied the mathematics grades and test scores of 53 teenage students who chewed gum and 58 who did not. Craig Johnston of the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, led the study which found chewing gum was associated with higher test scores. It was sponsored by the William Wrigley Jr. Company, which makes chewing gum.

4. **The Peace Prize.** This Ig Nobel Peace Prize went to the British Royal Navy for ordering its sailors to stop using live canon shells and instead shout "Bang!" The recruits at the land-based HMS Cambridge near Plymouth, Devon, reportedly load shells and set their aim before shouting "bang" into a microphone.

A member of the political opposition, Iain Duncan Smith, the Shadow Defence Secretary, was critical. He complained that even though five million pounds was saved, the procedure called into question the quality of the Navy gunners' training.

5. **High-energy physics.** This award is for the paper: "The Effects of Peanut Butter on the Rotation of the Earth." The authors concluded in the paper: "As far as we can tell, peanut butter has no effect on the rotation of the earth."

This paper also came with an editor's note: "With publication of this paper, we are hereby amending our longstanding policy regarding co-authors. Previously, we rejected any research paper that had more than ten co-authors. Many of our contributors, especially high-energy physicists, have pointed out that in some fields, especially high energy physics, research journals routinely publish papers that have one hundred or more co-authors. Accordingly, we are removing the restriction."

6. **Physics prize.** "Frictional Coefficient under Banana Skin," by Kiyoshi Mabuchi, Kensei Tanaka, Daichi Uchijima and Rina Sakai in the journal, Tribology Online. As you may have guessed, the purpose of this

scientific paper is to determine what makes a banana skin slippery.

7. **Neuroscience Prize.** "Seeing Jesus in Toast: Neural and Behavioural Correlates of Face Pareidolia," in the academic journal: Cortex. The authors are Jiangang Liu, Jun Li, Lu Feng, Ling Li, Jie Tian and Kang Lee. Their research involved understanding what happens in the brains of people who see the face of Jesus in a piece of toast.

8. The 2014 keynote address was given by Dr. Yoshiro Natamats, who was also the winner of the 2005 Ig Nobel Prize for Nutrition for photographing and retrospectively analyzing every meal he consumed during a 34 -- now 43 -- year period. (Yes, he is still doing it.)

Dr Haverkamp is an economist and adjunct faculty member at Singapore Management University. Just like Ig award winners, he often inspires his students and fans of his writing with unconventional and creative wit. This message is to answer your question: "what has this got to do with personal finance?!"

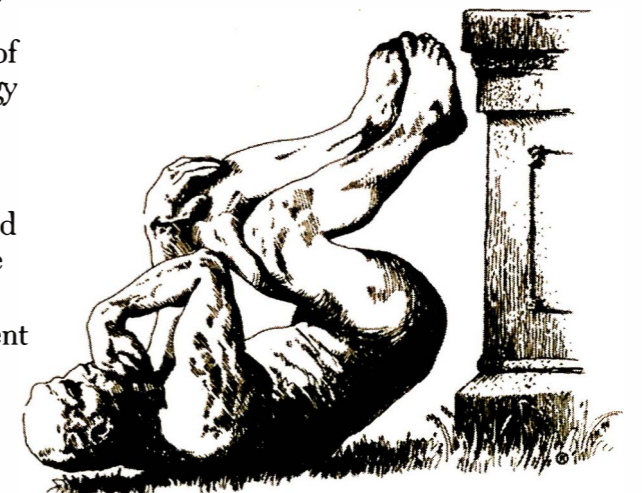


Photo: Improbable Research website