



Dan Meyer shows off his sword swallowing, while Annelies van Bronswijk (below) tells tales of bed bugs Photos: Stan Honda/AFP

Salute the simple sword of truth

This year's Ig Nobel prizes rewarded work on dung ice-cream and bed bugs. Kees Moeliker meets some of the winners

Monday

As usual, when September turns into October, I am on my way to Cambridge, Massachusetts to join organiser Marc Abrahams and his gang for the Ig Nobel prize ceremony. This year, it is the 17th time that the prizes, honouring achievements that make people laugh and then think, are given to 10 new winners. I won the prize in 2003 for my eyewitness report of the first case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck. Ever since, I have returned to the ceremony – with my stuffed duck – to take a bow in Harvard's Sanders theatre, and enjoy one of the finest pieces of scientific amusement I can think of.

I stop over in New York to return a loan from the American Museum of Natural History: 21 stuffed house sparrows of American origin, among them the first preserved US specimen collected in 1875 along the Hudson river, not long after the sparrow was introduced from British stock. The curators of the museum allowed me to exhibit this sparrow in The Grand House Sparrow Exhibition in Rotterdam last year, but insisted it be "hand-carried" both ways. The box of sparrows holds impressive documents issued by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the US Department of Agriculture, stating that the birds – dry as a bone and preserved for more than a century – do not carry avian flu and/or Exotic Newcastle disease. I pass through customs smoothly, no questions asked. At the museum, alongside Central Park, I return the sparrows and spend the afternoon in the mammal collection, studying fruit bats from the Philippines and Indonesia.

Tuesday

I travel by train to Boston. It is still summer in New England. I get a warm welcome at the Improbable Research headquarters in Cambridge from Abrahams and Milo, the dog that levitates when he is exited. We talk about this year's winners, and the programme for the ceremony.

A new event, related to this year's chemistry prize, has come up. Mayu Yamamoto of Japan, who will get the Ig Nobel chemistry prize for developing a way to extract vanillin (vanilla fragrance and flavouring) from cow dung, will be

honoured by Toscanini's Ice Cream, the finest ice cream shop in town, which has created a new flavour it calls Yum-a-Moto Vanilla Twist. Gus Rancatore of Toscanini's will serve it at the ceremony and, on Friday, there will be a free public tasting in the shop. I am curious about how he made the flavour, but the ice-cream maker won't tell his secret: "We only use the very best ingredients," he insists.

Wednesday

This year's biology prize winner, Annelies van Bronswijk of Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands, calls me. She has arrived. Her achievement spans more than 30 years of research into the mites, insects, spiders, pseudoscorpions, crustaceans, bacteria, algae, ferns and fungi with whom we share our beds each night. She is full of stories: "We even have grown some huge ferns from spores we took from mattress dust."

I ask her how she feels about winning an Ig Nobel prize. "It is an interesting way of being rewarded for serious research, but I have always seen the humorous side of it and, apparently, so did the Ig Nobel board of governors who selected me. The funny side is the fact that we never sleep alone, and even feed the millions of mites that infest our beds with our own skin scales. It gets serious when you realise that the mites' excrement can cause severe allergic reactions and chronic illness."

At night, we rehearse the ceremony. My task is to practise simultaneous translations into Dutch, German, Russian, Farsi, Polish, Turkish and body language. I meet Tabatha Bohmbach, a cute eight-year-old who will be on stage to make sure that Ig



Nobel winners do not exceed their 60-second time limit for acceptance speeches. Her "please stop, I'm bored; please stop, I'm bored" is irresistible.

Thursday

We are in the Sanders theatre to meet new and returning winners. The first to show up is Francis Fesmire, of the University of Tennessee College of Medicine, who won the 2006 Ig Nobel medicine prize for his novel treatment of intractable hiccups with digital rectal massage.

What has happened to him since winning an Ig? "The phone did not stop ringing for months: interviews and talks in all parts of the country," he says. But, strangely, Dr Fesmire was not asked to treat a poor girl in Florida who had the hiccups for six weeks.

Brian Witcombe, of Gloucester, and Dan Meyer of Antioch, Tennessee, have won the 2007 medicine prize for their penetrating medical report *Sword Swallowing and its Side Effects*, published last year in the *British Medical Journal*. Until today, Witcombe, a radiologist, and Meyer, a professional sword-swallower, have never met.

"Almost nothing was published about the medical side of sword swallowing, and Dan Meyer's database of all members of the Sword Swallowers' Association International was a true goldmine. We exchanged hundreds of emails," says Witcombe. Both new winners had heard only vaguely about the Ig awards before Abrahams phoned them. Despite his ignorance, Witcombe says he was "flattered, delighted and amused" and imagines colleagues "may feel a little envy and extra respect". Meyer says he will never forget the moment that he was notified of his nomination.

The mood of the new nutrition prize winner, Brian Wansink of Cornell University, is just as good. He won the Ig for exploring the seemingly boundless appetites of human beings, by feeding them, with a self-refilling, bottomless bowl of soup.

More new winners and Nobel laureates come in. The audience fills the theatre. Wansink grasps his soup bowl, Meyer hides a sword in his sleeve, I take up my duck and Marc Abrahams, master of ceremonies, dons his top hat. It is 7.30: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 17th annual Ig Nobel prize ceremony."

Kees Moeliker, curator of the Natural History Museum in Rotterdam, won the Ig Nobel biology prize in 2003
[Full winners list on EducationGuardian.co.uk](http://www.educationguardian.co.uk)