

Shut up! SpeechJammer among Ig Nobel winners

Associated Press

BOSTON — For anyone who’s ever been tired of listening to someone drone on and on and on, two Japanese researchers have the answer.

The SpeechJammer, a device that disrupts a person’s speech by repeating his or her own voice at a delay of a few hundred milliseconds, was named Thursday as a 2012 winner of the Ig Nobel prize — an award sponsored by the Annals of Improbable Research magazine for weird and humorous scientific discoveries.

The echo effect of the device is just annoying enough to get someone to sputter and stop.

Actually, the device created by Kazutaka Kurihara and Koji Tsukada is meant to help public speakers by alerting

Weird and humorous scientific discoveries awarded at Harvard University

them if they are speaking too quickly or have taken up more than their allotted time.

“This technology ... could also be useful to ensure speakers in a meeting take turns appropriately, when a particular participant continues to speak, depriving others of the opportunity to make their fair contribution,” said Kurihara, of the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology in Japan.

Still, winning an Ig Nobel in acoustics for the device’s other more dubious purpose is cool too.

“Winning an Ig Nobel has been my dream as a mad scientist,” he said.

As usual, the ersatz Nobels

were handed out by real Nobel laureates, including 2007 economics winner Eric Maskin, who was also the prize in the “Win a Date with a Nobel Laureate” contest.

Other winners feted Thursday at Harvard University’s opulent Sanders Theatre included Dutch researchers who won the psychology prize for studying why leaning to the left makes the Eiffel Tower look smaller; four Americans who took the neuroscience prize for demonstrating that sophisticated equipment can detect brain activity in dead fish; a British-American team that won the physics prize for explaining how and why ponytails bounce; and the U.S. General

Accountability Office, which won the literature prize for a report about reports.

Rouslan Krechetnikov, an engineering professor at the University of California Santa Barbara, and graduate student Hans Meyer took home the fluid dynamics prize for research into the sloshing that goes on in coffee cup as it’s carried.

Like many projects that have won Ig Nobels in the past, it started in a casual conversation based on everyday observations.

Krechetnikov and Meyer were taking a coffee break at a conference last year when they watched as others milled around trying to prevent staining their clothes.

The science of sloshing liquids has been studied before — in rocketry, for example, shifting weight can destabilize a missile or rocket — but no one’s ever really studied coffee as it splashes around, Krechetnikov said.

“It is one of those cases where we were interested in explaining the phenomena, but not changing it,” he said.

The reason coffee spills?: A person’s walking speed, their mental focus and, surprisingly enough, noise.

Are there practical applications? You could design a better coffee cup by using what Krechetnikov calls “a series of annular ring baffles arranged around the inner wall of the container to achieve sloshing

suppression,” although those solutions are impractical.

“We just wanted to satisfy our curiosity and, given the results, to share what we learned with the scientific community through peer-reviewed literature,” he said.

The 22nd annual Ig Nobels ceremony, with the theme “The Universe,” featured the usual doses of zaniness, including the traditional launching of hundreds of paper airplanes and the world premiere of an opera titled “The Intelligent Designer and the Universe,” about an insane, wealthy man who bequeaths his fortune to have someone design a beautiful dress for the universe.

“Personally, this goes along with my view of science,” Krechetnikov said. “There should be a fun side to it.”



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Sometimes tragedy does lead to triumph. My name is Dr. Charles Price. I’m a Board Certified Orthopedic Surgeon and Professor of Orthopedic Surgery.

And here’s my story of how love and science helped save my wife...and how it can improve the quality of life for millions of Americans.

Four years ago, my mother fell and broke her hip. As an orthopedic surgeon, I knew she was in desperate trouble. That’s because 25% of patients die within a year of a hip fracture. And that statistic hasn’t changed in over 40 years.

A few months later, I got more bad news: My wife of 40 years was suffering from alarmingly low bone density. It’s a common, but very dangerous condition for millions of women over the age of 50.

Sadly, my mom passed away just ten months later from complications of her broken hip. While I was devastated, I was determined not to let my wife become a statistic too. I had to find the key to real bone health quickly.

As an experienced academic orthopedic surgeon with 70 peer-related papers to my credit, my job had always been to heal damaged bone. Now I had to find something besides the standard treatments to support bone health and give my wife a better quality of life. I spent the next two years buried in research papers.

What I found was another wake-up call! According to the U.S. Surgeon General’s office, it is estimated that half of all Americans over age 50 are at risk for fractures caused by low bone mass.

There are drugs available, but drugs can have some bad side effects. There had to be something besides calcium and vitamin D to help support her bone health.

Then, my research uncovered some amazing information! I read a thirty year old document that

showed the mineral silicon plays a major role in bone health. Bone can’t form without silicon and that was something new to me.

Could silicon be the ‘hidden key’ to bone formation and bone health? China and India, two countries whose diets are rich in silicon, have the lowest frequency of hip fractures. In stark contrast, silicon is largely insufficient in our diet.

I was sure I’d found part of the answer! I rushed off to the drug store to find a silicon supplement. But what I found were mostly products that may not be easily absorbed in your system.

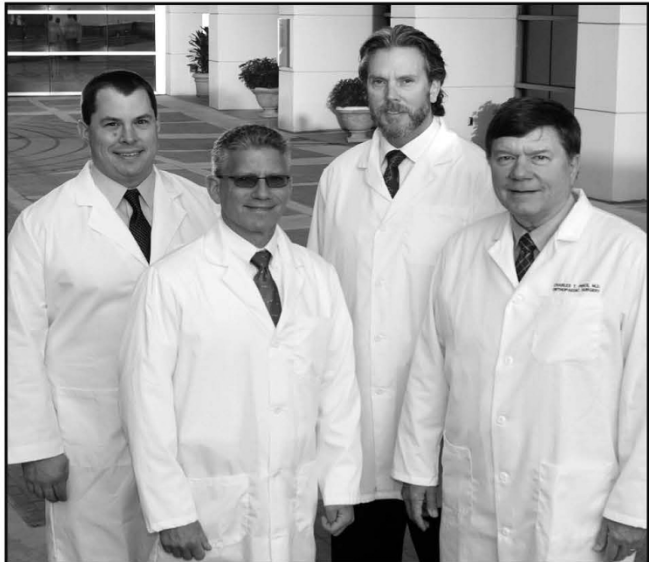
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Dr. Charles Price, far right, and a team of orthopedic surgeons have discovered that silicon could be a key to real bone health.



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