

# litmus paper

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS



Paul Broks and Mick Gordon  
Ego on Stage  
**2–3 pm/Town Hall**

David Williams, Mike Healy  
and Fred Taylor  
Britain in Space  
**4–5 pm/Town Hall**

FameLab Final  
**5–7 pm/Town Hall**

Richard Herring *et al.*  
Sci at Night Cabaret  
**9 pm–late/Town Hall**

## Laughter: it's a funny thing

by Kath Nightingale

If you want someone to laugh at a joke, you need to tell it at exactly 6.03 pm and preferably in the middle of the month. At least that's according to Prof. Richard Wiseman, sometime magician and psychologist, specialising in unusual behaviours at the University of Hertfordshire. While "The Science of Laughter" may sound like a dry version of an evening at a comedy club, we were in good hands with Wiseman. The secret to learning about laughter, it would seem, is giving it a go – and he was certainly good at extracting a giggle.

The talk centred around Wiseman's year spent in search of the world's funniest joke. He set up a website inviting people to submit their favourites and rate those that others had sent in. Interestingly, the winner turned out to be fairly average. Rather than finding the best joke, they found the one that



*A Wiseman knocks on the door...*

appealed to the widest range of people; and it was a typical run-of-the-mill madcap Spike Milligan jape, involving guns and ambulances.

Though Wiseman is mainly interested in jokes, they only

account for around 12–13% of the things we laugh at. We mostly laugh at things that are simply funny, rather than them having to be in a joke format. Emmanuel Kant believed that laughter evolved as a way of communicating good surprises out on the plains; Sigmund Freud, because we need to let out our repressed emotions about taboo subjects. Being able to understand jokes however, is a product of higher cognitive functioning. The first time a child tells that one about the chicken and the road, they laugh because they have the ability not only to understand the format, but also turn the system on its head and use an obvious punchline. Sounds like an excuse for a poor joke to me.

Wiseman pointed out that telling jokes is about deception; you have to create a situation and deliver it convincingly. Considering how much he had us laughing, it may be better that we didn't believe a word he said.

## We do care what the weathergirl says

by Adam Horovitz

Yesterday's "Wild Weather" talk was a breezy, PowerPoint-assisted romp through the extreme weather that has been blighting the world in the last few years.

Not that some of the events are necessarily blights, according to Sky News weather presenter Lisa Burke. Hurricane Katrina's obliteration of New Orleans, to give a particularly notorious example, was "an accident waiting to happen". Bear in mind that 80% of the land it was built on was below sea level, surrounded by the sort of water that is notorious for attracting hurricanes and riddled with levees.

Water featured heavily. According to Burke every disaster mentioned was "about water, the most precious commodity in the world", either too much or a distinct lack. Meric Srokosz' look at rapid climate change, and the effect human-

ity is having, was also preoccupied with water; natural, given that he is deeply involved in studying the rapid decline of water and heat circulated by the Atlantic conveyor belt. "We don't know what we're doing to the planet," he said. "We need to be concerned about that."

Geologically speaking, change is happening faster now than ever before, if the CO<sub>2</sub> records in the ice core are to be believed. Bearing in mind that they date back approximately 400 000 years, it's pretty certain that they are a good indicator.

Facts and open-ended questions rained like hail in this talk, making it a little too scattershot to be entirely rewarding, but it was a useful starting point. Both speakers debunked the sensationalism of the media, but the audience was left in no doubt that all they can do is slow the inevitable changes by cutting emissions and taking care.

## The poisoners' Bible

by Chloe Heywood

In the Tower of London, Sir Thomas Overbury's health has declined. His brain is fooled into taking up an amino acid laced with deadly poison. The poison cannot be expelled, the levels increase in his brain. It is futile, he has succumbed to mercury.

Thomas was one of several victims who appeared in John Emsley's tour through the more sinister chemists of our past and present. From a jealous musician giving antimony to Mozart, to the recent accusation of a couple feeding their son fatal amounts of salt, poisons are the weapon of choice for a scientifically minded murderer.

In the past, poisons were found in medicines, paints, fire retardants, cosmetics, water pipes and toys, and were generally pretty useful household items. But advances in our knowledge of chemistry and



our ability to detect substances means that it is now a lot harder for your average assassin to use poison.

Despite this, here are a couple of pointers: never trust your rum if it glows in the dark, it may contain phosphorus; and antimony, once used as a hangover cure, will certainly make you vomit.



Hunter: can he dig it? Yes he can.

## CSI: Cheltenham

By Emily Koch

"Archaeologists," John Hunter reassured us yesterday, "are, generally speaking, normal people." Having dispelled some misconceptions, Hunter began to explain the links between the work of these "normal people" and the work of police detectives. We all know that archaeology can be used to find out about ancient history – but did you know that it is essential in modern criminal investigations?

Hunter was among the first to realise that his archaeological skills could be used to investigate murders and genocide, and now he works on criminal digs across the world. But how can archaeologists help the police – surely anyone can dig a hole and find some bones?

Hunter explained that an archaeologist has the know-how to carefully maintain the integrity of a grave. Hunter can tell where the grave-fill ends and where the soil around it begins, so only material containing useful evidence is excavated. He can discern how a grave was dug – whether it was hurried or prepared – and how it was filled in. This is all invaluable information in an investigation, whether it concerns your next-door neighbour's wife interred in the back garden or mass graves in Bosnia – both of which are examples of cases that Hunter has worked on.

In their police work, archaeologists work closely with anthropologists. Together, they can work out, from details such as your age, gender, leisure activities and profession, where you are most likely to have buried your victim: "People just don't bury victims in random places." Let this be a warning if you've ever buried anyone and think you'll get away with it – with adroit diggers like Hunter on the case, you won't.

# Carry on doctor

by Jon Andriessen

The practice of healing may well be one of the oldest professions known to man, but if yesterday's "Bad Medicine" talk was anything to go by, then it's spent most of its time doing just that, practising.

Historian David Wootton gave a compelling argument as to how, through a process of conservative ignorance and self-righteous incompetence, doctors have systematically mistreated their patients for thousands of years. The tendency to revert to the classical Hippocratic methods surrounding the humours, and the good old cure-alls of blood-letting, enemas (apparently on the comeback trail) and emetics (sick), led to the dismissal of countless revolutionary treatments. Only at the turn of the 20th century – following the undeniable truths of "germ theory" – did the doctors finally turn the tide and start actually healing people.

The motto "first do no harm" was merely that, as doctors, spurred on by their misguided desires to heal, would dissect away like the Barber of Seville, "mangling the dead and disfiguring the living". After discovering that nitrous oxide was an effective painkiller, it took another 50 years before it was used in surgery, even though vets were commonly using it to treat animals.



Now that's just not funny.

GP Michael Fitzpatrick was quick to defend his profession and highlighted the difficulties of modern-day treatment. Fitzpatrick works in a typically overcrowded clinic, surrounded by patients, many of whom are not ill in the classic sense, but simply in need of a little TLC and direction. For him, it is important to see the patient as a person and not just a disease. He's staunchly defensive of his trade and refutes many of Wootton's claims, seeing the medical world as something of an ongoing process, learning from its mistakes and adapting to its needs and the society it treats.

Of course, in an ideal world this would all be irrelevant, but it's not; we don't live forever and we all need medical attention at some time or another. Patients are the archetypal captive audience, helpless and needy, so let's hope that bad medicine is really just a thing of the past.



"Slam the Atom" cartoon by Gemma Hastilow, see [www.gemmahastilow.com](http://www.gemmahastilow.com)

## Send in the clones

by Jonathan Cailles

"It's interesting to consider what all the fuss is about," mused Robert Winston as he introduced the Festival's update on cloning since the creation of Dolly the sheep 10 years ago.

Keith Campbell, one of the team responsible for Dolly, enlightened the audience as to how cloning is done. Not shying away from the ethical arguments he outlined its potential uses, from producing animal organs that can be used for human transplants, to replicating a successful racehorse.

Sir Robert Worcester then asked how much the public trusts science. Through a stream of statistics, we learnt that during the last five years trust in scientists has risen from 63% to 70%. "The vast majority of people in this country say that science makes a good contribution to society," said Worcester. But with 65% of us against cloning, Worcester warned us to question the information on which we base our opinions. A lack of awareness of the regulatory bodies is partly to blame, he suggested, even though Britain is the most regulated country in the world.

Winston then sought the audience's opinion on cloning, sparking a debate about the ethics and purposes of human cloning. Our reservations are good, he concluded: "We want people to be suspicious of the technology, but not incensed by it."

## THE DROID

Sky News' weather presenter, Lisa Burke, was heard scoffing at Fox News' claim to offer "fair and balanced coverage" at the end of her "Wild Weather" talk. Was it merely professional rivalry, or are there anti-Murdoch rumblings within the media tycoon's empire, The Droid wonders.

In response to recent rumours, The Droid would like to deny any suggestion of a possible Litmus Paper takeover by Rupert Murdoch.