

STRANGE SCIENCE

...a review of some of the most bizarre bits of biomedical news in 2008

Time flies: The company you keep can perhaps affect more than just your reputation. If you're a fruit fly, spending time with younger pals can extend your life, according to a study released this year (*Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* **105**, 7506–7510; 2008). The researchers reported that flies with a genetic mutation that reduces their lifespan survived about twice as long as usual when housed with young flies. So, this holiday season, perhaps it's worth paying the grandkids a visit?



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Pointing a finger: Reports that a man successfully re-grew part of his finger that had been accidentally sliced off generated skepticism among some scientific experts. The man, Lee Spievak, says he sprinkled a special powder made from pig's bladder on the finger for ten days, and in subsequent weeks the tip grew back normally—including the nail. According to the BBC, the powder came from the University of Pittsburgh and consisted of extracellular matrix. But critics who scrutinized the photos of Spievak's injured finger were pointedly skeptical. These experts were incredulous about the news, and said that on the basis of the photos it looked like the nail bed remained intact when the tip was lost.

It pays to believe: Money talks, but apparently it can also heal. Participants in a trial who received placebo pills were more likely to feel an effect if they were told each pill cost \$2.50 than if they were told each pill cost a discounted price of \$0.10 (*J. Am. Med. Assoc.* **299**, 1016–1017; 2008).

The subjects in the study experienced mild electric shocks to test their perception of pain relief. Among those told the pill cost \$2.50, 85% said they felt less pain after taking it, compared with 61% of the volunteers who were told they had the cheap version.



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Heartthrob hit: A good song can really get your blood flowing on the dance floor—and help you get the blood flowing of people in need of CPR. At the American College of Emergency Physicians annual meeting in Chicago, doctors reported that the Bee Gees' song *Stayin' Alive* clocks in at 103 beats per minute and provides the perfect rhythm for performing CPR chest compressions. The disco favorite seems the most appropriate song to use compared with other, more cynical hits that have a similar rhythm, including Queen's classic tune *Another One Bites the Dust* and the Backstreet Boys' *Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)*.

Numbers that made news in 2008

38%

The percentage of 86 US medical schools responding to a survey that have adopted a policy on institutional conflict of interest since the Association of American Medical Colleges issued a recommendation in 2001 to do so (*J. Am. Med. Assoc.* **299**, 665–671; 2008).

9%

The number of biomedical scientists who reported having witnessed research misconduct, according to a survey of 2,212 people at 605 universities (*Nature* **453**, 980–982; 2008).

45%

The proportion of doctors who admitted to prescribing placebos to patients (*J. Gen. Intern. Med.* **23**, 7–10; 2008).

3

The number of offices the US Food and Drug Administration says it will set up in China after health scares involving tainted medical products.

238

The number of people whose deaths have been linked to the blood thinner heparin since January, according to the FDA. The fatalities dwindled, however, after experts identified the source of contamination of this medication.

3 million

The number of people in low and middle-income countries receiving antiretroviral medications in 2007, up from 300,000 in 2002, according to new data released by UNAIDS.

\$48 billion

The sum of money authorized for five years by the US government as part of PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief).