

# Highlights from the literature by A Fo Ben



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## HE UNDERSTANDS EVERY WORD I SAY

Many of us, especially those with small children, often feel that the dog is the only member of the family who ever listens to us. This intuition has been backed up by a recent neuroimaging study that looked at the ability of dogs to recognise human voices. They showed that dogs have voice areas highly analogous to those in humans. Moreover, dogs' brains react not only to genuine human vocalisation, but also to the emotional content of our speech. So maybe that look of understanding as your confidant in the man's best friend isn't *just* a ploy for more dog biscuits. *Curr Biol* 2014;24:574–8

## MISS WHIPLASH

Not every 'negative' trial brings disappointment. In the case of a well-designed randomised control trial from Australia of 172 people with chronic whiplash, there was no added benefit for a comprehensive exercise programme over simple advice. That this trial did not find in favour of the added placebo value of twenty sessions of exercise is important as we increasingly look to cost-effective solutions to common problems. *Lancet* 2014 Michaleff *et al.* doi online 4 April 2014

## SING, SING A SONG ...

Ever had a jingle that you just can't get out of your head? Those tunes, known as earworms, are annoying and frustrating when you find yourself singing about the latest breakfast cereal during a ward round, but researchers at UK's Plymouth University have used their undoubtedly memorable qualities to help

patients with Alzheimer's disease. Dr Alexis Kirke and colleagues at the Centre for the Interdisciplinary Centre for Computer Music Research have developed songs for patients to sing about their daily routines to jog their memories about the next appropriate action. An unusual solution to a significant problem but one that the patients seem to find rewarding. The reactions of those living with them are not recorded. <http://vimeo.com/84024362>

## SING OUT LOUD, SING OUT STRONG... (OR AT LEAST IN TUNE)

If you've ever heard anyone with absolute pitch singing a perfectly in-tune note with no reference point, then you are likely to have been as fascinated by it as are many musicians and neuroscientists. A relatively rare and impressive skill, absolute pitch was always thought to be able to be acquired only early in life. However, a recent study suggests otherwise. A group of men taking the histone-deacetylase inhibitor valproate were significantly better than a control group at identifying pitches played to them. Hope for all of us, perhaps. *Frontiers in Systems Neuroscience* 2013;7:Article 102

## GROW YOUR OWN DIGITAL NEURONE AND HELP NEUROSCIENCE

At last—you can play computer games and justify it in the name of science. The Wellcome Trust has developed an on-line game called *Axon*, freely available for anyone to play. It requires skill and speed of response to collect 'proteins' with the aim of growing a digital

neurone to be as long as possible. As well as being reasonably addictive, the information collected anonymously from 854 064 on-line gamers about time taken and breaks between sessions has already proved an important 'big-data' resource to study learning. Don't blame us when you are late for your next outpatients clinic trying to beat *A Fo Ben's* record of 17 401  $\mu\text{m}$ ! <http://axon.wellcomeapps.com> *Psychol Sci* 2014;25:511–8

## HEAVY METAL, HOUSE MUSIC?

Attentive Carphology devotees will be aware that A Fo Ben loves a good poisoning and is not averse to a little showbiz razzmatazz. Therefore, a recent *Lancet* case report of a 55-year-old man with severe heart failure but minimal atherosclerosis is notable. He had a fever of unknown origin, lymphadenopathy, was deaf and blind and previously had undergone bilateral hip replacement. Left hip radiography identified myositis ossificans secondary to metallic debris. Blood cobalt levels were 1500 nmol/L (normal <15.3) and chromium was 942 nmol/L (normal <9.6). The authors claim that their 'light-bulb moment' was remembering a similar case on the thinly-based-on-medicine TV series, *House* (series 7, episode 11). That the case was cracked with the assistance of fictional physician, and professional curmudgeon, Dr Gregory House, is the cherry upon the cake. *Lancet* 2014;383:574.



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