

VALLECULA: (*looking at the Reader's Digest on the floor*). I doubt he is particularly thankful.

*The door opens and both men look up, expecting to see the Doctor. Both begin to stand and Vallecula pushes Phlegmon back into his chair. A blur of a white coat runs through, head deep in a chart.*

VALLECULA and PHLEGMON: (*together*). Doctor!

*The doctor vanishes. VALLECULA sits down.*

PHLEGMON: Was that him?

VALLECULA: Clearly, thank goodness.

PHLEGMON: I should like to thank him for thanking us.

Really though, I don't see what all the fuss is about. He looks like you or me.

VALLECULA: That's the point, dear man. He looks like you and me, but he has the good grace to be neither of us.

*The sound of a pager going off in the background. The slam of a door, a blur of a white coat with a head buried in a medical chart. They both rise up, Phlegmon pushes Vallecula back into his chair.*

PHLEGMON and VALLECULA: (*together*). Doctor!

*The door slams shut. The nurse pokes her head around the corner.*

NURSE: The doctor was needed at the hospital. He will be back as soon as he can. He asked that you proceed to the examining rooms and disrobe. Examine yourselves and re-dress. Your exam results will be confidential of course. Please don't know them until the doctor has explained to you your findings. We pride ourselves on an ethical operation here.

PHLEGMON: What sort of ethical operation?

VALLECULA: Perhaps a graft of morals, or insertion of

Teflon scruples. Maybe even a lateral Kantotomy. I have a friend who is recovering from a Pufendorfoplasty.

PHLEGMON: But what if I reject these?

VALLECULA: A sure sign of disease. They'll be forced to operate.

PHLEGMON: Then I will comply.

VALLECULA: Better.

NURSE: (*annoyed*). Gentlemen? (*Her head disappears.*)

VALLECULA: (*sighs*). It's always so damn drafty in those rooms. And every magazine has been sneezed in. What time do you have?

PHLEGMON: (*looks at his watch, taps it, shakes it*). Time has stopped.

VALLECULA: I am in hell. Nevertheless, I must leave and pay the parking meter.

PHLEGMON: Will you come back?

VALLECULA: Of course.

PHLEGMON: What if the doctor cannot see us today?

VALLECULA: We wait until tomorrow.

PHLEGMON: And if not tomorrow?

VALLECULA: Then the tomorrow after that.

PHLEGMON: All this waiting cannot be good for one's sinuses.

*Vallecula stands, puts on his coat, starts to go toward where the nurse last appeared, changes his mind and leaves through the door. Phlegmon begins to sneeze, looks at his lap full of tissues and the Reader's Digest, and sneezes into the crook of his arm.*

Dr. Maskalyk is *CMAJ's* fifth Editorial Fellow and returns to Toronto in July 2003 to finish his fifth year of an emergency medicine residency. Dr. Cellarius practises family medicine in Toronto, Ont.

## IgNobel (3): navel-gazing

This year's IgNobel judges honoured a study of belly-button lint.

Call it the "belly-button lint sign." If you're examining a patient and encounter an umbilicus that looks like the lint trap in your dryer, chances are the patient is male, middle-aged and hairy. It can also be a sign that the patient is putting on weight.

These are the findings of a massive survey of belly-button lint (BBL) conducted by Dr. Karl Kruszelnicki of the University of Sydney, who won the coveted IgNobel Prize for Interdisciplinary Research (see [www.improbable.com](http://www.improbable.com)).

A first in the world, the BBL survey was inspired by real questions called in to "Dr. Karl's" science ra-

dio show. "Why is my belly-button fluff blue, and why do I get it?"

It turns out that no one knew the answers, so the intrepid Aussie researchers rose to the challenge. In addition to a Web-based survey, researchers collected samples and asked participants to shave their belly hair to see if it stopped lint from collecting. Lint was examined under an electron microscope.

While the results were not entirely definitive, they did provide support for Dr. Kruszelnicki's working hypothesis. BBL is believed to be made from clothing fibres, as well as some hair and skin cells. Belly hair is believed to act "like a one-way ratchet mechanism," pulling fibres into the navel. In-

deed, many of the experimenters found that shaving around the navel stopped the accumulation of BBL.

The colour question remains unresolved. A lot of people notice that their BBL is blue, although they may not wear blue. Theories about the blue shift include the colour of laundry detergent, the colour of clothing dyes and the presence of urea in sweat. One respondent speculated that BBL begins to compost in the navel, turning different colours as it disintegrates.

A man named Graham Barker has collected his BBL since 1984, filling three large bottles and earning him a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. — Carolyn Brown, Ottawa, Ont.