

'Narrow' Nobel Prize categories stir debate

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The Nobel Prize categories have basically remained unchanged for more than a hundred years and some critics are calling for them to be expanded to better reflect the modern world.

"I expect more of the Nobel Prizes," said US epidemiologist Larry Brilliant, one of ten high-ranking scientists who sent an open letter to the Nobel Foundation last year asking it to consider expanding the categories.

"I admire them as the certificate of worldwide approval of the greatest achievements, (but today) they fall short," he told AFP.

Brilliant and others lament that many researchers are never recognised with a prestigious Nobel simply because their work falls outside the narrow categories outlined in Alfred Nobel's will in 1895.

Today's cutting-edge research in fields like environmental science and ecology and public health, for instance, are not easily acknowledged in the original prize categories: medicine, physics, chemistry, literature and peace, which were first attributed in 1901.

Those categories remain unchanged, and although the Swedish Central Bank in 1968 created an economics prize in Nobel's memory, the foundation is quick to stress that it is not in fact a "real" Nobel prize.

"The world has become vastly more complex," Brilliant said, adding "I think there are many other categories that could have been included in

the Nobels."

Nobel Foundation chief Micheal Sohlman flatly rejected that idea.

"There will not be any new prizes ... We have quite enough prizes," he said.

"The existing categories mark Alfred Nobel's fields of interest," he explained, pointing out that "there are lots of new prizes out there that can take care of new categories."

Sohlman also stressed that the different Nobel committees have sought to expand the range within their categories, making it possible for work on climate change for instance to be recognised with the Peace Prize.

Tim Hunt, a British biochemist who won the 2001 Nobel Medicine Prize, agreed that the prize committees "exercise extreme ingenuity to get around" the narrowness of the categories.

He was among the signatories to the 2009 letter to the foundation, but told AFP he actually thinks the categories themselves are fine but is critical of the Nobel rule allowing no more than three people to share a single prize.

"It's perfectly possible to conceive of a Nobel prize-deserving discovery that could not easily be ascribed to any one, two or three people, that would fall through the cracks," he said.

Other critics insist there is no reason the foundation should not be more flexible in its approach to the prizes since Nobel's final wishes have already repeatedly been adjusted to keep step with modernity.

A clear example is the addition of the Economics Prize, which although

not considered a true Nobel is attributed by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences like the Physics and Chemistry prizes and figures on the Nobel website.

"They have violated the will before," Brilliant said, insisting that "in light of (the Economics) expansion, which was a concession to modernity ... then what about a [Nobel prize](#) in global health?"

Nobel's will also stipulates that the prize should go to "those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind," but the committees rarely limit themselves to discoveries in the past 12 months alone.

"It is very difficult to judge if discoveries and theories have been of the greatest use to humanity if you're just looking at the past year," explained Paul Sjoebloom, a historian at the Nobel Museum in Stockholm.

He points out that "Alfred Nobel himself was very intent on the prize keeping in step with developments ... I can think of many categories that could have been included."

Hunt meanwhile said the Nobel Foundation should not rush to include "new" areas such as climate science.

"Global warming is still mired in controversy," he said, insisting the committees need to avoid repeating past errors when prizes were attributed to not fully proven science, as the 1949 Medicine Prize given for work on lobotomies.

Sjoebloom also acknowledged the Nobel Foundation needed to tread carefully.

"If there are too many prize categories the status of the prizes could be watered down," he cautioned.

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