

Nobel laureate explains 'sexist' science lab comments (Update)

June 10 2015



A Monday Oct. 8, 2001 photo from files of Dr. Tim Hunt, winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine, in a laboratory in London. The Nobel Prize-winning British scientist has apologized Wednesday, June 10, 2015, for saying the "trouble with girls" working in science labs is that it leads to romantic entanglements and harms science. Tim Hunt made the comments at the World Conference of Science Journalists in South Korea, according to audience members. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant, File)

Nobel Prize-winning scientist Tim Hunt apologised Wednesday for causing offence after his suggestion that female scientists could not take criticism without crying and that they disrupted lab work sparked outrage.

The British laureate said his comments, at a lunch for women attending the World Conference of Science Journalists in South Korea, were intended to be light-hearted but he also "meant to be honest".

"Let me tell you about my trouble with girls," he was reported as saying.

"Three things happen when they are in the lab: you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticise them they cry."

The 72-year-old also called himself a "chauvinist pig".

Speaking to BBC radio on Wednesday, he admitted he made the comments but said: "I'm really sorry that I said what I said. It was a very stupid thing to do.

"What was intended as a sort of light-hearted, ironic comment was apparently interpreted deadly seriously.

"It's terribly important that you can criticise people's ideas without criticising them and if they burst into tears it means that you tend to hold back from getting at the absolute truth.

"Anything that gets in the way of that diminishes, in my experience, the science."

Hunt, who shared the 2001 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for the discovery of protein molecules that control the division of cells, also repeated his concerns about "emotional entanglements" in the lab.

Falling in love is "very disruptive to the science", he said.

"I'm really, really sorry that I caused any offence. That's awful. I certainly didn't mean to. I just meant to be honest."

Connie St Louis, a lecturer in science journalism at London's City University, was in the audience and described the experience as "awful".

"After he had finished, there was this deathly silence," she said.

Attendees "couldn't believe... that somebody would be prepared to stand up and be so crass, so rude in a different culture and actually to be so openly sexist as well. It wasn't funny, what he was saying, at all."

Dorothy Bishop, professor of developmental neuropsychology at the University of Oxford, said: "In one short speech he has set back the cause of women in science.

"The comments get at the heart of bias against women in science: the notion that we can't be serious contenders because we are too emotional—and, even worse, we distract the men from their science by our sexual allure."

Professor Anne Glover, former chief scientific adviser to the European Commission president, said: "I hope his attitudes regarding women are largely confined to a former generation."

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