

Nobel Prize-winning scientist says he was forced to resign

14 June 2015, by Gregory Katz



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)

A week ago, Tim Hunt was a well-known Nobel Prize winner who was promoting science education throughout Europe and the world.

Today he's widely perceived as a sexist who has been stripped of most of his positions because of inappropriate comments about women in science.

Gone is his position with the European Research Council science committee, his role at the Royal Society, and his honorary post at University College London. He said Sunday he was fired from the latter, while the university has said only that his resignation was accepted.

Hunt's fall followed a speech Tuesday at the World

Conference of Science Journalists in South Korea in which he said that girls cause trouble in labs because "you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticize them, they cry."

The comments caused an instant Twitter storm that quickly led to Hunt, 72, leaving his posts even as he apologized. He has said he had been trying to make a joke, but nevertheless stood by his comment that love affairs in the lab are disruptive to science.

He was vilified by many, including The Guardian's Anne Perkins, who wrote that his comments were "the educated man's version" of blaming rape victims because they were wearing short skirts before they were attacked.

Hunt, 72, laments that his cherished career is finished—and some prominent women scientists who thought his remarks were deeply offensive said Sunday the punishment may be too harsh.

Athene Donald, a leading physicist who is master of Churchill College at Cambridge University, said Hunt always enthusiastically supported her work when she served for five years as Gender Equality Champion at the university.

"I've spent a lot of time with him and I've never seen any sign of sexism," she told The Associated Press. "He has traveled the world since he got the Nobel Prize, talking to young audiences, male and female, giving so generously, and now he has been ruined."

Hunt won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2001 and later was made a knight.

Donald said his comments were "indefensible" but there have been no cases of women coming forward to say they were poorly treated by Hunt, or discriminated against in any way.

Ottoline Leyser, a former student of Hunt's who now directs the Sainsbury Laboratory at the University of Cambridge, said she was upset that Hunt's offensive comments could have a negative impact on young women considering a career in science but that his record is otherwise unblemished.

"All my interactions with him were very positive," she told the AP. "He was a very enthusiastic and inspirational teacher. I've no indications from my experience or from colleagues that he's in the slightest way sexist."

She said the speed with which news of his comments spread via social media has reinforced for many scientists the dangers of speaking to the press or to the public.

"We're all of us terrified," she said. "In this media age, when sound bites spread so quickly, an off-the-cuff remark after a lunch in some conference can suddenly result in the fatal destruction of your career."

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