

Nobel scientist Tim Hunt: female scientists cause trouble for men in labs

English biochemist tells conference women in laboratories 'fall in love with you and when you criticise them, they cry'

Rebecca Ratcliffe and agencies

Wednesday 10 June 2015 06.53 BST

Scientists should work in gender-segregated labs, according to a Nobel laureate, who said the trouble with "girls" is that they cause men to fall in love with them and cry when criticised.

Tim Hunt, an English biochemist who admitted that he has a reputation for being a "chauvinist", said to the World Conference of Science Journalists in Seoul, South Korea: "Let me tell you about my trouble with girls ... 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."

Hunt said he was in favour of single-sex labs, adding that he didn't want to "stand in the way of women".

The 72-year-old, who won the 2001 Nobel prize in physiology or medicine, made the remarks when addressing a convention of senior female scientists and science journalists.

His comments were tweeted by Connie St Louis, who directs the science journalism program at City University, London, and was attending the conference. She commented: "Really, does this Nobel laureate think we are still in Victorian times?"

Hunt is a fellow of the Royal Society, which has distanced itself from the remarks, tweeting: "Tim Hunt's comments don't reflect our views."

It later released an official statement, saying that it was committed to getting more women into science. "The Royal Society believes that in order to achieve everything that it can, science needs to make the best use of the research capabilities of the entire population," it said.

"Too many talented individuals do not fulfil their scientific potential because of issues such as gender and the Society is committed to helping to put this right."

Despite numerous education initiatives, the number of women in science, technology or engineering (Stem) has remained stubbornly low. Only 13% of people working in Stem occupations are women, according to Wise, which campaign about this issue. The gap is also stark in academia, where 84% of full-time professors working in science,

engineering and technology are men.

David Colquhoun, emeritus professor of pharmacology at University College London, said Hunt's comments were a "disaster for the advancement of women".

Hunt's words have also been roundly criticised by female scientists on Twitter. One woman, a postdoctoral researcher, tweeted: "For every Tim Hunt remark, there's an extra woman in science that takes an interest in feminism. Ever wonder why there are so many of us?"

Hunt, who won the Nobel Prize for discovering protein molecules that control the division of cells, could not be contacted for a comment.