

Subject: Letter to The Times

From: "Riley, Andrew" <andrew.riley@thetimes.co.uk>

Date: 17/06/2015 12:18

To: <d.colquhoun@ucl.ac.uk>

CC: Andrew Riley <andrew.riley@thetimes.co.uk>

Dear Professor Colquhoun,

I wondered if you might care to write a short letter to The Times in response to our leading article, Lost Faculty on Sir Tim Hunt? I have appended the article.

Please let me know if the idea is of interest.

Kind regards

Andrew Riley

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Andrew Riley | Letters Editor


The Times

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Lost Faculty

Academia's treatment of Sir Tim Hunt
is a disgrace

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Sir Tim Hunt has made a stupid joke. Fourteen years ago he won a Nobel Prize for a discovery which concerned the behaviour of protein cells, but this appears to be less important. A week ago, you see, he made a stupid joke. In, moreover, a stupid place to make a stupid joke. Speaking to a collection of female scientists and science journalists at the World Conference of Science Journalists in Seoul, South Korea, he rolled his eyes at the notion of working alongside

women in a laboratory. “You fall in love with them,” he said, “they fall in love with you and when you criticise them, they cry.”

It would not have been surprising, or terrible, if this joke had been simply ignored. Nor would it have been surprising, or terrible, if it had caused a moderate fuss. Late last week, in wry response, many female scientists across Britain posted photographs of themselves online in full-body biohazard lab coats, using the Twitter hashtag #distractinglysexy. This was witty and a proportionate response to the “joke”. If Sir Tim was back in his lab, feeling humiliated, he would only have had himself to blame.

Yet what actually happened as a result of his joke is that he was sacked from his position at University College, London. “I was told by a senior that Tim had to resign immediately or be sacked,” his wife, fellow professor Mary Collins, told *The Observer* newspaper. “Tim duly emailed his resignation when he got home.” This was an illogical, petty and cowardly act by UCL. He should be reinstated at once.

Were he a professor of gender studies, it seems fair to assume that Sir Tim would be a poor one. He admits, freely, to being unreconstructed in his views, although apparently not unreconstructed enough for it to have interfered in his relationship with Professor Collins. He does believe that laboratories should be single-sex, which is certainly an antiquated view. Until last week, most would have regarded this as a less essential aspect of this 72-year-old professor’s core identity than his pioneering work in biochemistry.

In displaying that it thinks otherwise, UCL has discredited itself far more than Sir Tim managed to. Two years ago, the university banned a student Islamic group after it was found to have enforced gender segregation at a student event. Sir Tim, who has in fact run mixed-sex labs for his entire career, was banned not for actually segregating, but for merely admitting, with an acknowledgement of his own absurdity, that he thought it would be a good idea. One can imagine a religious order excommunicating a senior member for such a thought crime. A university should hold itself to higher standards. The defenestration of Sir Tim was not a feminist act. Rather, it was the pathetic act of a university authority which lacked the backbone to face the prospect of a few days of students saying nasty things on Twitter.

Sir Tim did not call women poor scientists. He did not call for fewer of them to be employed. His gaffe, if one can even call it that, was little more than a confession of his own failings, and in a matter quite unrelated to his field. In the wake of his enforced resignation, he has also lost his role on the Royal Society’s Biological Sciences Awards Committee and the European Research Council. This is madness. All of them should be even more embarrassed than he is.