



## Judge by actions, not words

*Sexist comments made by my former boss Tim Hunt are not an indication that he is biased against women, argues Alessia Errico.*

From 2004 until December 2010, I worked as a scientist in the London laboratory of Tim Hunt. Given the media frenzy over his comments this month about women scientists, and the way he has been portrayed as sexist, you might think that I had a miserable time. Not at all; it was a great experience. He was an inspiring and supportive mentor. Not once did I feel that he treated me differently because I was a woman.

The anger that many people in research feel at Tim's inappropriate and indefensible comments — that women and men in the lab fall in love and that women cry when criticized — is understandable. But the reaction to them, and their impact on his career, has been disproportionate. Tim has apologized for his remarks, and I, for one, accept that apology. Others should do the same, and he should be allowed to continue his work.

Tim says that his comments were intended as a joke. I believe him, because I was once on the receiving end of one of his public jokes — and his attempt at humour then was just as bad.

My early research was funded by a European consortium. Each year, Tim and I had to attend the consortium conference, where the group leaders would discuss the work. As we travelled to the first of these conferences in April 2005, Tim realized that he did not have a photo of me to include in his talk, which was that afternoon. He always travelled with a camera in his shirt pocket, so he took a photo then. During the talk, he introduced the picture to the audience with the line: "There is Alessia, wearing exactly the same jumper." Of course, everyone in the audience searched for me among themselves and, having verified that I was indeed wearing that jumper, had a good laugh.

I was so embarrassed. There I was, at the first meeting to discuss my research, and I had to start by explaining to new colleagues that, yes, I did own more than one set of clothes. Still, I was not offended. I knew he was joking, and it did provide a way of breaking the ice when I met people later.

The fear of many scientists, and of those organizations that have severed their ties with Tim, is that his judgement might be biased. I know him well and can say that he is not sexist. I once attended a 'Women in Science' event where his wife Mary was one of the speakers and where many of the issues that we have read about in the media were discussed. Tim was also in the audience, and I know that he engaged with the problem of discrimination against women scientists and supports efforts to tackle it.

I have seen discrimination and sexism in

science and in wider society. I have seen female colleagues talked about in negative ways when they left the lab to have children. The issue is a genuine one that demands urgent attention. But it is grossly unfair that Tim should be considered, and treated, as an emblem of this sexism or gender discrimination.

I treasure all scientific discussions with Tim; he always had an interesting point of view and would constructively challenge us all. When I delivered my first seminar at our institute, Tim discussed the slides with me several times to ensure that the logic behind the project and each experiment was clear. I gave several talks while I was in the lab and his contribution to my preparation was always useful and positive. Although very busy, whenever he could he visited the lab, and would pop by to say hi and ask how things were going.

He always supported my work, even when my research project took a different direction from the lab's main expertise. For example, he arranged for me to visit a lab in Japan to learn a specific protocol that proved fundamental to my research. His passion for discoveries had no boundaries. It is important to remember that although we need role models and champions for women in science, we also need truly inspirational figures for science.

When my European grant ended, it was exclusively thanks to Tim that I got the extra funding guaranteeing me a good amount of time to continue my project after my maternity leave. At the time, we had several chats about my future. I had doubts about a career as a group leader, but Tim said I was good at

science and technically very skilful, giving me the encouragement that I needed.

After my career in research ended, I became an editor. I know the weight of words; however, facts and actions are much more important. A year after that first consortium conference, and wearing a different jumper, Tim and I again headed for the annual meeting. This time, I had a different kind of shock. Tim suggested that I should be the speaker, not him, because it was my research. Well, it was quite stressful. The members of that consortium included some of the most important cell-cycle scientists in Europe, but it was a great opportunity, and not only for me. Tim's action led to other group leaders leaving the stage to their postdoctoral fellows. Some were men and some were women. I doubt Tim cared which; all he saw were promising young scientists. ■

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