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Australian wins Nobel Prize for medicine

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Australia's first female Nobel laureate Elizabeth Blackburn has been hailed as an inspiration to women, not just for her groundbreaking research into a possible "fountain of youth".

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Professor Blackburn, 60, has become the first Australian woman to win science's biggest prize after she and two American colleagues were recognised for their research into the life span of chromosomes.

It potentially holds the key to understanding cell growth and the ageing process, an essential "fountain of youth", Prof Blackburn has said.

The breakthrough discovery into how chromosomes are protected by telomeres and the role of an enzyme called telomerase also holds significant implications for the mechanisms of diseases, such as cancer.

Politicians, fellow scientists and excited locals in Prof Blackburn's hometown of Hobart have all lauded her achievement as a great day for science, for Australia and for women.

The Australian-born dual US citizen became just the eleventh Australian to win a Nobel prize - and Australia's first woman - after she and fellow researchers Carol Greider and Jack Szostak were jointly awarded the 2009 Nobel for Physiology or Medicine on Monday.

Prof Blackburn had blazed a trail for all young Australian scientists but particularly female scientists, Acting Science Minister Craig Emerson said.

The recognition proved Australia punched well above its weight in the field of science - a path he hopes the country will continue to follow.

"This just shows that imagination and creativity and hard work are the keys to Australia's future," he said.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd also paid tribute to Prof Blackburn's reputation as a scientist who placed equal weight on the ethics of science as well as the research itself.

She was awarded Australia's second biggest science accolade, the Australia Prize, in 1998.

Prof Blackburn, a molecular biologist, studied at the University of Melbourne before moving to study at Cambridge to complete her doctorate.

She now a professor of biology and physiology at the University of California, San Francisco.

Prof Blackburn says an early-morning call on Monday informed her of the win.

"As I groped in the dark for the phone and some very well-spoken voice identified Sweden, Nobel Prize and committee it was a good start but then you begin to think how many friends have a really good sense of humour," she told AFP.

But scientists have unanimously praised the significance of the joint research - a culmination of Prof Blackburn's life's work.

"It sort of translates into a fountain of youth; the number of years of healthy living is related to telomere length," she said.

"We don't think clocks will be turned back but it is a question of whether we will extend our health span."



Professor Elizabeth Blackburn was announced the 2009 Nobel Medicine Prize winner for her work on the the enzyme known as telomerase that assists chromosomes in cells to stay eternally young. (AAP)

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The discovery of telomerase - which Prof Blackburn explains as being like the protective ends on shoelaces which stops them fraying - is also groundbreaking.

It is thought to a contributing factor to the onset of age-related diseases.

Prof Blackburn has expressed a need to encourage more women into science, those women who are often lost to science as family obligations become greater.

"There's a whole collection of social and family ... reasons why this happens and we lose much of the talent in science at that stage," she told ABC Radio.

Science careers ought to be flexible enough to allow women to meet all their commitments, rather than forcing them to choose one over another, Prof Blackburn said.

"I really think we should look to careers that take into account that over some periods ... there are family years.

"That doesn't mean the person is automatically incapable of science."

Australia's 11th Nobel Prize winner, Prof Blackburn joins an eminent line-up of past winners including Prof Barry Marshall from the University of Western Australia, pathologist Robin Warren, immunologist Peter Doherty, Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet and Sir Howard Walter Florey.

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