

## Interview with Sky News: National Science Week

**Dr Alan Finkel was interviewed on Sky News about National Science Week.**

**Host:** Joining me now is the Chief Scientist, Alan Finkel here in the Canberra studio. This Science Week, you've challenged people to name five scientists that they know. You are comparing it to our awareness and knowledge of sportspeople in the sense that we don't have the same view of the science world. Can you tell us five off the top of your head now?

**Alan Finkel:** Since I'm Chief Scientist, can I up the ante on myself and I'll try and give you a female scientist from every state. From Western Australia, we've got Fiona Stanley who made a fantastic contribution over the years in helping understand how folate prevents spina bifida. South Australia, Tanya Monro, world-expert on optical fibres as sensors. In Victoria, Michelle McIntosh from Monash University is helping neo-natal mothers not die from bleeding by giving them powdered oxytocin. In Tasmania we have got Elizabeth Blackburn, a Nobel Prize winner on ageing mechanism. NSW Emma Johnston, wonderful marine eco-system biologist. Queensland, Tamara Davis – young astrophysicist, world-expert on dark matter and dark energy. Northern Territory, has to be a crocodile researcher - Sally Isberg, doing fantastic work on that. ACT – Carola Vinuesa – who is one of the world experts on treating auto-immune disease.

**Host:** This time of Science Week comes into the time when the Prime Minister also announces the science prize – I've seen a few of the winners over the years – make some wonderful contributions, as Chief Scientist you are involved in that as well. What is the calibre like of our local scientists and is enough being done to keep them here and avoid what's known as the brain drain – losing so many internationally?

**Alan Finkel:** It is always one of those things when you are in your routine daily existence, you become very blasé about things and you don't appreciate what's around you. But last week in my capacity as Chairman of the selection committee for the science prizes, I and 10 colleagues had the pleasure of looking at the finalists. And I've got to tell you it was so hard making those final decisions. The calibre of the scientists and innovators young and old was absolutely stunning.

To go to your second question about the brain gain. That's the way the world works, it's good for young scientists to go overseas and get experience. We need them coming back, and we need other experts coming back on visas, or 457 visas.

We need to bring people in – there is a brain gain, there is a brain drain – it's a two way street. I think people get too focused on the drain, but the brain gain can be important as well.

**Host:** From scientists returning home?

**Alan Finkel:** Scientists returning home and new scientists coming in.

**Host:** They also need attractive environments, and not one having funding ripped from them. Do you think the government in its re-shaping of its approach to CSIRO for example, cuts in 2014, just now we have seen a re-commitment to the workforce at the CSIRO – are you encouraged by what you are hearing about when it comes to that institution, but science more broadly from this government?

**Alan Finkel:** I am, science has suffered funding cuts from both sides of government for a few years now. And that's started to reverse in December. The government announced the National Innovation and Science Agenda – which put a lot of money into the research equipment, into

telescopes and a little bit more back into the CSIRO. Of course, during the course of this year there has been a lot of stress and difficulty and the CSIRO re-focused itself as it was dealing with this limited budget envelope and trying to choose its strategic investments. And it was a problem they under-invested in the very necessary climate research that Australia needs. On their own bat – with some encouragement from me – but now more recently with direct support and guidelines from the minister – that climate science research capability has been substantially restored in very effective long-term fashion, so I am encouraged.

**Host:** It's National Science Week, and the Chief Scientist Dr Alan Finkel – thank you for your time this morning and we look forward to speaking to you over the coming months, particularly around the Prime Minister's Science Awards.