

And the winner is ...



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Sep 2001

News

And the winner is ...



A new award to honour outstanding work in mathematics, comparable to the Nobel prizes in physics and other areas, has been set up by the Norwegian government.

There is already one top international prize in mathematics, the Fields Medal, often referred to as the "Nobel prize of mathematics". However, though its prestige in the mathematical community is similar to that of the Nobel prizes, its public exposure has been far less. Partly this may be because Fields Medals are awarded only every four years. Also the medal is only available to mathematicians under the age of 40. When Andrew Wiles announced his celebrated proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, he was just too old to be awarded one of the 1998 medals.

The Abel prize, which will be awarded annually, was announced by the Norwegian prime minister Jens Stoltenberg in August. An initial fund of NOK 200 million (US\$22 million) will be established by the Norwegian government in 2002, and the first prize, worth about US\$500,000, will be awarded in 2003.

A prize in the honour of Niels Henrik Abel (1802 – 1829) was first suggested in 1902 by King Oscar II of Sweden and Norway, but was never established, as union between the two countries was dissolved. Abel was a Norwegian mathematician who made a significant impact on mathematics despite his short and tragic life. At the age of 16 he extended Euler's binomial theorem, and at 19 he proved that there is no general algebraic solution for quintic equations, a problem that had baffled mathematicians for centuries.

Mr Stoltenberg said that the Abel Prize was an expression of the importance of mathematics, and was intended to present the field with a prize on the highest level. The prize has the support of the International and European Mathematical Societies and recipients will be chosen by an independent committee of international mathematicians. The Abel Prize will be established in 2002, the 200th anniversary of Abel's birth.

Rachel Thomas



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