should discuss their career aspirations with family and friends to rehearse for more formal interviews.

BENEFITS TO TAKING A BREAK

Spending time away from research brings many challenges, but also some advantages. Returnees, says Cohen, offer more experience and maturity than early-career scientists straight out of university, and have a renewed enthusiasm and excitement for their field. "These are huge benefits in the employer's eyes," says Cohen.

After a bachelor's degree in biology, Michelle Kwak tried her hand at several unrelated careers, but eventually got back to science through a part-time programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge that combined MIT courses with career-development workshops and culminated in an internship.

Kwak, now a neuroscience technician at MIT, plans to apply to PhD programmes next. The straight track from bachelor's to PhD "would have been more efficient", she says, "but exploring these other areas helped me develop as a person".

David Karlin, a virologist at the University of Oxford, UK, also says that his time away improved his outlook. Karlin left research to direct a programme teaching molecular and cellular biology to the public at a university in France. During his seven-year break, he kept up research with collaborators, which helped with his Wellcome fellowship application.

Karlin's outreach work gave him a broader perspective and vision for his research. "I was hired at Oxford precisely because I had an original approach," he says. "I cannot hide my atypical career path, so, as a colleague says, 'When you have a wooden leg, shake it!'"

Skok and others encourage young researchers to consider a break, especially if they become stretched between demanding research and responsibilities at home. Despite the challenges associated with returning to research after a long hiatus, many researchers have made the transition with the right planning, and the rewards are huge — especially for those who are passionate about the scientific process.

After several career stops and starts — necessary to take care of a son who needed two heart transplants — Ana Hoffenberg, a medical doctor, gravitated towards research. Driven by her intellectual curiosity and passion for knowledge, she eventually landed a postdoc fellowship at the University of Colorado in Denver. "I'm hoping this will be the opening door to an independent research career," she says. "With the hospital bills, I needed income. But I also needed the playground in my mind." ■

Kendall Powell is a freelance science writer based in Lafayette, Colorado.

COMMUNICATION

Voices for Careers

Columnist competition yields six winners.

BY KAREN KAPLAN

Nature would like to introduce our six new Careers columnists, the winners of an international contest.

Earlier this year, we sought essayists immersed in the challenges of graduate studies and postdoctoral fellowships — stages that are crucial to fledgling researchers. We selected three doctoral students and three postdocs from four continents, who conduct research in the diverse fields of synthetic chemistry, genetics, civil and environmental engineering, ecology, pain research and cell biology. Half of them work in the United States, and half in other countries. Choosing the winners was even more daunting than for our past contests; we received nearly 300 entries from close to 40 countries.

Competition was fierce and we chose an elite group of writers who have not only outstanding communication skills, but also a variety of backgrounds and interests. The winning entries were incisive, contemplative and clever — and told compelling stories.

The columns, and shorter journal entries, will run online at go.nature.com/uy5nyc, with a few columns appearing periodically in the section's print edition.

A PROBLEM SHARED

Newly minted Careers columnist Adam James, a PhD candidate in synthetic chemistry at the University of Tasmania in Hobart, Australia, is motivated to write because he enjoys outlining problems and offering answers. James, who took philosophy courses as an undergraduate, is proud of his ability to construct an argument, and hopes to offer meaningful and valid solutions to common concerns encountered by our readers.

Lucie Low, originally from the United

Kingdom, is a postdoc studying the neuroscience of chronic pain at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. In her sample column entry, she brought both a keen sense of humour and a serious outlook to a discussion of Canadian laws that tax postdoc stipends yet leave postdoctoral researchers with minimal employment benefits.

First-year PhD student Lydia Murray also has a wry sense of humour. In her writing, she wants to help others come to terms with the 'lows' of research. For Murray, who is studying molecular genetics and cell biology at the University of Glasgow, UK, the importance of buoying others' spirits is one of the most important lessons from her first year of graduate study. Giving a forlorn colleague a pat on the back might assist them more than is immediately obvious, she writes.

COMMUNICATION OF ALL SORTS

Mariano Loza-Coll, now in his second postdoc position, sees communication as science's biggest single challenge. A native of Argentina, Loza-Coll works at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, and would like to promote more effective transmission of ideas between scientists, the media and the public. He hopes to meet this goal through his research and writing.

Andrew Peterman offers the perspective of an academic who has ties to the corporate world. A PhD candidate in civil and environmental engineering at Stanford University in California, Peterman has researched and devised strategies to help Walt Disney Imagineering in Glendale, California, to reduce energy consumption. That taught him a lesson about communication: it is often a challenge, even among colleagues.

Communicating science, in this case to students, is also an interest of Gaston Small, a postdoc in ecology at the University of Minnesota in St Paul. Small, who has a PhD in ecology and a master's degree in teaching with a focus on science education, is investigating the role of microbes in increased nitrate concentrations in Lake Superior. With two young children, Small is also addressing the challenges of a work-life balance from a father's point of view. He is in the process of deciding whether to stay in research or return to the classroom.

We hope that readers will track our columnists' progress, points of view and perspectives with interest as they pursue their own career aims. And we offer our sincere thanks to all who applied. ■

L. ALLEN/CORBIS