TURNING POINT
Kate McAllister

CAMBRIDGE COGNITION

As a PhD student at the University of Cambridge, UK, Kate McAllister wrote articles, designed a neurology course for a lay audience and worked on videos and podcasts. This October, the clinical neuroscientist took home a Science Communication Award from the Society of Biology, a UK advocacy organization.

What shaped your early-career aspirations?
I avoided science during my undergraduate studies in psychology at the University of Glasgow, UK, until the end of my degree, when a good teacher got me interested in biology and neuroscience. I did my master's at the University of Cambridge, working on mouse models of Huntington's disease, and spent three years as a research assistant in clinical neuroscience. I just wrapped up my PhD on mitochondrial function in people with Down's syndrome.

When did science communication become important to you?
During my time as a research assistant, I worked on Prader–Willi Syndrome, an inherited disease that often leads to obesity. I was asked to write for a newsletter that went out to families and patients. I'd always been interested in writing, and explored opportunities with the university's science magazine. As my interest grew, I came across a public-engagement training course called Rising Stars, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. For the course, another trainee and I worked with a film-maker to create a short film called *The Scanner*, on using brain imaging to understand the syndrome, which won the Digital Revolution award at the Sheffield Doc/Fest in 2010. I got so much nice feedback, especially from patients' families, that I realized science communication is important and hugely worthwhile.

Describe your other communication pursuits.
I've found that once you do a bit of outreach, people ask you to do more. I helped to put together a course on neuroscience for lay people that proved popular. I also worked on a podcast for a radio show called *The Naked Scientists*. The British Film Institute also asked me to consult on a travelling live event focused on cognitive enhancement, which was an interesting combination of art and science.

Were you ever discouraged from pursuing these interests?
No. My PhD supervisor was very encouraging. He could see how, if I was interacting with lay people, it was important for me to broaden my communication experience, and that that would also help my interactions with study participants. I think support for these activities is very adviser-specific. The important thing is to show that it is a worthwhile endeavour and relevant to the group's work. For example, my involvement in the documentary helped to bring attention to Prader–Willi Syndrome.

Are these types of award important?
Yes. Communication is becoming such an important part of our jobs as scientists, and with funding getting so much more competitive, you have to be able to talk to people about your science. You can't hide away any more.

What do you plan to do next?
I don't want to close the door on academia, but I started a job recently at a neuroscience start-up firm called Cambridge Cognition. I'm working as a scientist, but am also involved in academic collaborations. We use computerized touch-screen tests to assess different aspects of cognitive function. The results can be used, for example, by academics wanting to link cognitive function to different brain circuits or by drug-makers who want to detect the cognitive effect of a candidate drug. My interest in science communication will continue, but it will probably take a different form.

How have your science-communication efforts influenced the way you work?
Writing about other scientists' work forces you to appreciate what others are doing and how your work fits into the bigger picture. As well, I've found collaborations I wouldn't have stumbled on otherwise. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

POSTDOCS

Office poll

The number of postdoc advice offices at US research institutions has ballooned to 167, up from around 25 in 2003, according to the US National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) in Washington DC. The NPA surveyed offices to learn about postdoc demographics, policies and compensation. Covering an estimated 79,000 postdocs, the offices coordinate services such as career guidance, training and visa information. But very few of the 74 institutions that completed the survey track career outcomes. Most worrisome, says NPA executive director Belinda Huang, is that 70% of offices operate on $40,000 or less a year. "We're concerned about how small these budgets are for the numbers of postdocs they are serving," she says.

EDUCATION

Graduate feedback

The US National Science Foundation in Arlington, Virginia, has launched an online forum to gather input about the future of graduate education. The impetus came from several years of reports from federal agencies and others that found that existing graduate programmes do not adequately prepare students for careers outside academia, says Ryan Bixenmann, part of the team that will maintain the discussion at nsfgradforum.wordpress.com. The forum will collect feedback on: mentoring, attracting women and minorities, preparing for jobs outside academia, building non-technical skills, and other issues. "We wanted input from the stakeholders," Bixenmann says.

STEREOTYPING

PhD costume slammed

A low-cut, crotch-length graduation gown with a mortarboard marketed as 'Delicious Women's PhD Darling Costume' has been garnering ire and jokes since being offered on Amazon this Halloween. Almost two-thirds of around 350 reviewers give it the lowest possible rank. Carol Colatrella, who co-directs the Center for the Study of Women, Science, and Technology at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, says that the gown sexualizes women. "This is a subtle way of digging at them and saying 'you're just a woman' or 'you're a sexual object'," she says. Such outfits are not limited to costume suppliers; in 2012, a European Commission campaign to attract more girls to science was criticized in part for featuring similarly short skirts.