

From Suits to White Coats

Eric Fang and Olivia Tan are currently first year students at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. Both of them earned their degrees in non-medical disciplines and began their careers in Singapore's financial industry. They tell SMA News why they chose to leave the corporate world to enter Medicine.

SMA: Eric and Olivia, tell us a bit about yourself. What did you study in university, and what led you to work in the finance industry?

Eric: I graduated from Cornell University with a degree in Computer Science and Economics, and a master's degree in Operations Research. After that I joined the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC), which had sponsored my undergraduate education. GIC was set up to enhance the returns of our country's reserves, and so I felt my contributions to GIC would go some way in helping the cause of the common man.

Olivia: I studied Economics and Japanese at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and then pursued a Master of Philosophy degree in Development Studies at the University of Cambridge. I also spent time at Waseda University (in Tokyo) and Yonsei University (in Seoul) learning Japanese and Korean.

I started my career at McKinsey & Company which is a global strategy consulting firm, working for financial institutions and high-tech clients throughout Asia, then got headhunted into Axiom Asia Private Capital when it was started. At that time, Axiom Asia, a private equity fund-of-funds, had just raised its first fund, and I wanted the entrepreneurial experience of building a brand and growing a team. I was placed in charge of investments in Japan and Korea, and was secondarily involved in Chinese deals. Axiom Asia is now one of the largest independent Asian private equity fund-of-funds.

SMA: Olivia, what did you enjoy about working at McKinsey and Axiom Asia?

Olivia: The thing that I enjoyed most about my previous career was getting to work with very capable and experienced people, from whom I learnt a lot. At McKinsey and Axiom Asia, besides having very capable colleagues, I also had the privilege of working closely with the senior management of our clients and investees, many of whom had very interesting careers and viewpoints. They were inspiring in their own way. I also enjoyed the travel, the fast pace, and the relentless focus on efficiency.

SMA: Eric, what did you enjoy about working at GIC?

Eric: I enjoyed the challenges of the job, the exposure I got from meeting many respected experts across the industry, the sharing of ideas and learning from their myriad of experiences. What was particularly exciting is that financial markets never stay the same, and even if one is armed with the best data and model, one can never predict the markets' next move.

SMA: Both of you had found a level of success in the finance industry. Was it difficult to move out of your comfort zone and to what seemed to you, the relatively unknown path of Medicine? What was the most difficult part of making this decision?

Eric: It was the familiarity with finance (rather than any level of success) that defined my "comfort zone". I had known and studied the field for eight to nine years (including university education) and I now need to reacquire knowledge in a completely different field. After all, some say that learning Medicine is akin to learning a new language. Probably the most difficult part of this decision would be starting all over from scratch and not earning an income for the next few years!

Olivia: It was definitely a very long and difficult decision that was questioned by many people important to me. The hardest part is starting over from the bottom. It is quite humbling, which can only be a good thing!

SMA: What gave you the impetus to become a doctor? Could you share with us an encounter that inspired you to realise that this was your calling, and to make this life-changing decision?

Eric: Two years ago, my then 20-month-old nephew was diagnosed with medulloblastoma, an aggressive form of brain tumour. My wife and I packed our bags and went to help the family in Palo Alto, USA, while my nephew was being treated at Stanford University Hospital. Spending time at the cancer ward and watching his progression was a turning point for me. I decided to study for the Medical College Admission Test (which is required for admission to Duke-NUS) and sat for the exam in the three months I spent there. The rest, as they say, is history.

Olivia: I think after a rewarding seven years in tertiary services, I increasingly felt the need to contribute to society, through my work, in a more fundamental way. I knew that I not only wanted a career that would be quite challenging (which consulting and finance fulfilled), but that also allowed me to help society on a day-to-day basis. Being a doctor seemed like the best way to achieve that.

A quote from St Augustine comes to mind: "Find out how much God has given you and take from it what you need; the remainder is needed by others." You could say that this is my attempt at using my abilities for "others".

SMA: Olivia, how did your family and friends support you in your decision to move from your previous career to one in Medicine?

Olivia: Initially, many of my family, friends and colleagues thought I was quite crazy to leave a good job and start all over again, but they supported me nonetheless. I managed to convince my parents by pointing out to them that I could eventually become their primary physician. But I know that they still worry about my decision.

SMA: Eric, we understand that you are married. How do you manage to juggle family and school, and how has your family supported you?

Eric: Studying Medicine at Duke-NUS is intense indeed. I often stay back after classes to study with friends. I set goals for myself each day and it is important to have enough self-discipline to achieve them. Teammates and friends in school helped me cope with school too.

However, the key to juggling all these is having my wife's understanding and support in pursuing Medicine. She is still working, and that takes care of our family's finances. Furthermore, she encourages me a lot when the going gets tough. We are expecting our first child, a little princess, in April this year. With a baby, it will definitely be challenging balancing family life and school, but I have a very supportive wife who is both capable and independent.

SMA: In what ways are a career in finance and Medicine similar or different? How has your corporate background prepared you for medical studies?

Eric: Interpersonal interactions and the ability to deal with uncertainty are important similarities between finance and Medicine. However, finance is more results oriented, while Medicine is multifaceted.

I am more focused and committed as compared to when I was an undergraduate. The varied life experiences I have behind me and the desire to use my skills and abilities to contribute to the advancement of medical science provides me with a sense of purpose and fulfillment. This helps me overcome the rigour of medical school.

Olivia: It's still early days so it's quite hard for me to comment, but some of the clear differences include compensation and pace of career progression, which tend to be more variable in finance. Also, the goals of finance and Medicine are naturally extremely different. It is refreshing and quite inspiring to see how my professors care for their patients.

It remains to be seen how much of my experience and skills are transferable, but I am interested in administration and policy, and those are areas where strategy and finance skills should come in handy. I am also used to long hours at work and the constant, futile struggle for work-life balance.

SMA: Olivia, why did you choose Duke-NUS for your medical studies?

Olivia: Being a mature, Singapore-based student, Duke-NUS was the obvious choice. I only wish I had applied earlier.



First-year Duke-NUS students Eric and Olivia

SMA: Eric, we understand that you were attached to A/Prof Josh Gooley's sleep lab while pursuing your PhD and you are now pursuing your MD as well. Could you tell us more about that?

Eric: I am in the MD/PhD programme. Candidates in this programme normally start with two years of MD study, but I started with my PhD last year. My research at Asst Prof Gooley's lab was sleep deprivation. I hope that my medical training will add a clinical dimension to my research and make my research topics more directly relevant and translational.

SMA: How has Duke-NUS provided you with support?

Olivia: For one – they admitted me! Eric and I are quite unusual in the cohort which is mostly much younger than us, and whom mainly have biology related degrees, and I am very grateful that Duke-NUS took on a chance on me despite my unusual background. I'm also constantly inspired by how committed and accessible our faculty members are despite their busy schedules. It's obvious that a lot of thought has gone into the preparation of our classes, and they always stay back for as long as it takes to answer our questions. Their dedication to our education is extremely motivating!

Eric: Duke-NUS has some of the best faculty members and senior management; they are not only engaging, but also inspiring. Through them, I can explore my interests and I also understand what it means to be a good clinician. I feel that I can go to any faculty member even if it's just to talk about a personal issue. Also, school policies are supportive of students who are keen to pursue their interest. Finally, I have teammates and a group of like-minded classmates whom I can count on whenever I have difficulties with schoolwork. **SMA**