

The Road **Less** Travelled

Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member, speaks with 2 graduates who found the courage to pursue their dreams in medicine.

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but work only becomes laborious if
one does not enjoy what one is doing.

*"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."
– "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost*

Fans of the cult TV series "Felicity" will be familiar with Ben Covington, a popular high school athlete who went on to study English and drama at New York University, only to realise a few years later that he wanted to be a doctor. The latest season being aired on local television depicts his often difficult journey through a pre-med course, yet also illustrates how life's toughest choices also turn out to be the right ones.

The following is an email interview with 2 people going through situations similar to Ben's. Both are Singaporean, and are currently medical students at Sydney University.

A is formerly from Temasek Junior College, and graduated from the National Technological University with a Bachelor of Business degree. She later worked for 4 years in the commerce field before deciding to make a career switch. B is my ex-classmate from Raffles Junior College, and was a popular sports captain in his younger days. He completed an engineering course at NUS before discovering that medicine was his true calling. Both agreed to this interview on condition of remaining anonymous, and I thank them for sharing their stories with us, and wish them the very best in their future endeavours.

Q: When did you first decide to become a doctor, and why?

A: In my teenage years, when a family member got sick. That incident probably triggered my interest in a medical career. I also enjoyed studying science, especially biology, and wanted to do something related to these subjects. I guess, over the years, the desire to be a doctor grew stronger, as I had more contact with relatives and friends who got sick. I also had more opportunities to observe doctors and other health professionals at work.

B: I cannot put it down to an exact date, but many things have contributed to the decision over the years. Perhaps the visits to the doctors as a frequently ill child left an indelible mark on my memory. Or perhaps it was due to an interest in biology since young. All have played a part. But I suppose the day of reckoning came when I was rejected by the NUS medical faculty. I discovered the full extent then, and afterwards, albeit quite devastatingly, of how much I had wanted to do medicine and nothing else. One learns to appreciate what one has been taking for granted only when it has been lost. Such is the regrettable side of life, isn't it?

Q: Why did you decide to join a non-medical course instead of going overseas initially?

A: Mainly due to financial difficulties. Hence, I took the easy way out and did a business course, as it more or

less guaranteed me a job upon graduation. Most of my peers were also going into this course, and the expectation then was to do anything commerce-related, while the science course was considered as something people took only as a last resort. Furthermore, I thought that if I went into science, I would end up being a teacher, which didn't appeal to me.

B: For starters, my GCE 'A' level results were not fantastic, so that ruled out many overseas options. More importantly, circumstances at the time did not favour an overseas education, both family-wise and financially. To tell you the truth, at that moment, I was clueless in terms of my next step. This might sound like a joke, but I chose engineering because a couple of my good friends were doing that as well, even though physics had been a bane during my life as a student. However, on hindsight, I must say that the years spent in engineering had helped me overcome an otherwise insurmountable technophobia.

Q: What propelled you to take this big step in going to medical school after graduating from your respective courses, despite all the additional time you would have to spend studying some more?

A: I didn't enjoy myself in business. Figuring out consumer shopping mentalities is not my area of strength. (I worked in a market research firm for a short while after graduation.)

Hence I decided to find my interest somewhere else and settled on exploring my first love – science. Of course, the thought of spending the additional time studying was intimidating, in comparison with, for example, switching from science to business instead – 1.5 years of MBA and some related work experience is probably enough. But due to the nature of medicine, there's just so much to know, so I knew I had to be fully committed or else just forget about the whole idea of entering medical school.

B: Push and pull factors. I was tired of doing things that did not make me happy – drifting around aimlessly and chasing meaningless shadows had its limits. There was always this unfinished sentence in my life. The opportunity was there and I was in a better position to be away from home, so I felt it was the right time to follow my dream. True enough, there is plenty of hard work ahead, but work only becomes laborious if one does not enjoy what one is doing. I am only too grateful for this second opportunity that I have, and I guess losing some sleep is a small price to pay.

Q: Was there anything or anyone who helped you make this decision?

A: The decision was made mainly on my own, but with the support of my family and close friends.

B: No, but I would not have made the decision without knowing that my family is fully behind me on this.

Q: Why Sydney University?

A: Immediate recognition by the Singapore government is a major factor, as I would like to practise back home, and be close to my family.

B: For a couple of reasons. Firstly, the university has a strong reputation in the international arena. The graduate medical programme has also been in place for a few years now and would have achieved some kind of working

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efficiency. Secondly, the standard of living in Sydney is comparable to that back home and so it would not be too much of a financial drain to live there. Thirdly, Sydney is close to home and shuttling between the two cities would not be a hassle. Lastly, the university is one of the institutions recognised under the Medical Registration Act, and that leaves the option of returning home to practise an open one.

Q: How has it been so far? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

A: It's been fun and interesting. I definitely should have done this earlier if my financial situation had allowed it. The advantages include self-directed learning, providing many opportunities for us to explore our own interest(s). The main disadvantage is that I have to be very motivated!

B: There have been ups and downs, but more of the former. One of the good features of the programme is self-directed learning, which focuses on a problem every week. It is good in the sense that we have flexibility with regards to the depth and scale of what we wish to cover. The flip side of the coin is that one can get pretty lost at times in a sea of information.

Another key feature of the programme is "learning off one's peers". Students spend a substantial amount of time each week in discussions on issues related to the problem of the week in tutorial sessions, which serve as a platform to test oneself on the adequacy of his or her self-directed learning. I must admit that I am not a great fan of learning in this manner, although it has its merits. I feel that each member of a tutorial group has to be meticulously picked to form an

optimal mix in terms of numbers and backgrounds of the students. If the composition of the group is not optimal, members of a quieter nature or those from a non-medical or non-science-based background might feel intimidated, a situation I found myself in more often than was comfortable.

But the highlight of each week has been the clinical day because this is when we get to see patients with conditions related to the problem of the week in our respective clinical schools. Theory is good, but nothing beats hands-on experience!

And I certainly enjoy the interaction with students not only from different countries but also from diverse backgrounds. It has been quite amazing to listen to the stories of how others ended up in Sydney as well.

To top it all off, Sydney is a beautiful city to live in. Some say it is the "best address on earth".

Q: Any thoughts on choosing medicine as a career?

A: I'm not too sure if it is THE right choice yet, but I'm quite certain that this is where I am going to stay and where I feel I can make a substantial contribution.

B: I don't think I have had enough exposure in the medical field to make a fair judgement. And the impact of the choice varies between individuals. But as with other choices in life, there are certainly opportunity costs if one chooses to walk down this path. I believe this is the path for me because I feel a level of comfort and conviction in performing my tasks that I have not experienced elsewhere. Everyone knows one or two keys that open the vaults of fulfillment in life, and I think I've found mine. ■