

PROFILE: BRIAN SCULLION

Doctor in the house? Yes, at William Blair

With a pandemic raging across the world, the hunt is on for a vaccine to curb it or cure it, making biopharma and diagnostics one of the hottest areas in investment banking. It also makes bankers who understand the sector uniquely valuable.

At boutique investment bank William Blair, Brian Scullion is one such specialist.

Scullion walked away from the emergency room more than 20 years ago because he feared what would come after an exciting residency as an ER doctor - a long career as a specialist, focused on one small corner of medicine.

"Being a young physician in the hospital late at night a lot of responsibility falls on you. You get to take part in some very dramatic episodes," Scullion said. It was the kind of work that has been dramatised by the likes of George Clooney on TV - bringing people back from cardiac arrest - but that wasn't necessarily what the next 30 years were going to be.

"I realised that the next 20 or 30 years would go from this very broad hospital experience doing all kinds of exciting and interesting work to focusing on one area. It left me wanting more," Scullion told IFR.

ER TO BANKING

From that realisation, the quest began for a new career. Talking with other doctors who made the transition into business, Scullion found a world where he could leverage his training.

He spent several years working in the health plan arena as a medical director for an insurance company. That led to a job in finance and landing at William Blair, right as the Chicago-based investment bank was expanding.

With a partnership structure and collegial atmosphere, Scullion found William Blair was the right fit from day one.

That was despite his entry into investment banking coming just as it was fragmenting into more specialised areas, just as he feared would happen if he had stayed in medicine.

In banking, however, it worked out well for Scullion. He said 20 years ago there were a few firms that had strength in healthcare; it wasn't a deep industry specialisation and most people were generalists.

"That world is gone and it's a world of specialists in investment banking up and down the spectrum of firms," Scullion said. "More business is aggregating in fewer firms who have more specialists. That shift created greater opportunity for people who had a real understanding of some of the particularities of healthcare valued by clients and investment banks."

The healthcare group at William Blair has around 75 bankers around the world. Scullion is based in Chicago, its biggest office. London is the second largest, and there is a sizeable office in Frankfurt.

HOT HEALTHCARE

Healthcare has been one of the few areas where many investment banks have expanded in recent years, and that trend has accelerated with the coronavirus crisis.

Arranging financing or other capital markets activities for some of the up-and-coming firms could be a game-changer in many areas.

"I get to work with a lot of companies that have been successful, that have perfected a new technology that's going to change diagnostics or therapeutics or delivery of healthcare," Scullion said. "I get to touch and see and feel that ... it satisfies my curiosity."

Scullion graduated from Stanford Medical School and after additional research training received an MBA from Northwestern. He was always interested in science and medicine, and his career in investment banking keeps him at the forefront of a constantly evolving field across robotic surgery, visualisation, minimally invasive surgery, and diagnostics, in a way that being a specialist in medicine could not.

"No one can be an expert in all these spaces ... but having had the scientific and clinical training I have, I can come up to speed and understand these new situations more adeptly than maybe someone who doesn't have that background," he said.

That helps him size up the strengths of his clients to determine what's special about them and their value. And it gives him understanding of the markets, trends, obstacles and pain points of certain approaches.

Scullion focuses on diagnostics and instruments. It's been a bright spot for dealmaking recently, even as overall M&A activity has slowed.

William Blair recently closed a deal advising Seattle-based DNA sequencing startup Stratos Genomics on its sale to pharmaceuticals giant Roche. Stratos' technology is called Sequencing By Expansion, which converts DNA into more easily-read

polymer, making it cheaper and faster to sequence DNA.

Offerings for other diagnostic companies have also been well received, Scullion said. It's a good financing market for those companies and investors have enhanced appreciation about how essential these technologies are to the healthcare system.

William Blair also recently did a US\$80m follow-on for California-based molecular diagnostics company Genmark. The company is hoping for clearance to use test kits designed to detect the Covid-19 virus.

It's the best time to be involved in the sector, Scullion said. Understanding of molecular biology is being used to improve diagnostics and therapeutics, which is being married with better technology, he said.

Philip Scipio

