

## Profile assignment: #11

Dr. Vin Gupta flew to Uganda to prepare for the next crisis to come.

Gupta, then a research fellow at the Harvard Global Health Institute, knew it was possible that an epidemic, maybe a pandemic, could come in the near future. He wrote op-eds about how medical information had been politicized, and how that hindered improvements to a broken healthcare system in America. He knew the World Health Organization's decreased funding could hinder an effective pandemic response, that if one were to spread across the world, healthcare systems would be unprepared.

"Back in, gosh, three years ago now," he said.

Three years later, those gaps are visible to the rest of the world. The WHO has come under scrutiny. The world "desperately needs" better medical communication experts, he said. He sees much of the pandemic response as damage control for what could have been prevented with better messaging. On the trip to Uganda, meant to study the response to the Ebola epidemic, identifying those problems was supposed to be the first step.

"But gosh, I mean, none of it is sufficient," he said.

He's explained this in a polo shirt on The Today Show and in medical scrubs to Covid-positive patients in a Seattle ICU. He's advised some of the nation's most powerful companies on how they can help combat Covid outbreaks. His face has become a fixture of a cable news cycle that rarely sees pulmonologists talk about their work.

He warned in [March](#) 2020: "What's happening in Italy is actually, nearly happening here already."

In [August](#) 2020: "I'm more worried than I was in March."

And, on Monday, he said he's "very optimistic" that the worst of the pandemic is behind the U.S. this year, though some zip codes could see third and fourth waves.

For 15 months, Gupta has been a rare link in a long-existing gap that has quietly defined the U.S. response to Covid: those who work directly on the frontlines of the pandemic - in patient practice and in research - and those who communicate those findings to the public.

The American Medical Association is [urging](#) its members to create rapport with local and national press. The Center for Disease Control has come under [scrutiny](#) for what many experts call unclear messaging and guidelines. Gupta wishes elected officials could say "I don't know" more as information has come in bits and pieces over a 15 month period.

“I felt comfortable being in an exposed environment because I felt like I was speaking to topics that I was an expert in,” Gupta said.

He’s felt “ready and primed” for the moment.

But what if he’s only one of a few?

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Gupta never had a grand plan to become the public face of pulmonology, an ICU doctor and a consultant for Amazon’s Covid response team. Nearly a decade ago he was a Princeton graduate who enrolled in the Air Force’s critical care unit. He watched the Air Force transport medical supplies to African countries hit by Ebola. Some of his colleagues [delivered](#) emergency medical supplies to New York City at the start of the pandemic.

Two years ago he joined Virginia Mason Hospital’s ICU as part of the hospital’s Surge Team, a group of emergency doctors that fill shifts at the Seattle-based hospital when patient counts are high.

Only a few months passed until Seattle became the early epicenter.

Dr. Eliot Fagley, medical director for Virginia Mason’s ICU, worried as questions mounted about both the virus and how to best respond.

“What I was also able to use him for was as a sounding board for, you know, things like, ‘Hey, man, are we doing this?’” said Fagley. “Are you comfortable with what our approach is?”

March turned to April, spring turned to summer, and soon, Gupta’s life research had become a political pressure point in a contentious election season.

The Democratic National Convention was held virtually as President Donald Trump stood [maskless](#) in front of thousands at a rally. Georgia Mayor Brian Kemp (R-GA) [sued](#) Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms and the city council for Covid restrictions on businesses. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R-FL) [threatened](#) to rescind funding to a school district who planned for fully remote learning in August.

“Just as the SEALs surmounted Osama Bin Laden to justice, so too would the Martin County school system provide parents the meaningful choice of in-person instruction or continue distance learning,” DeSantis said in an August [speech](#).

What Gupta wanted was a national shutdown, yet mask and reopening guidelines were decided mostly by states and local municipalities. In late August, on a podcast called *The Pilot Boys*, he said he was more concerned than he was in March.

“A lot of this is about public health communication,” he said on the podcast. “A(n) (Anthony) Fauci or a (Deborah) Birx can only do so much. I can only do so much from whatever small pedestal that I have.”

Then the conversation turned to what could potentially end the pandemic.

“One other area that’s talked about a lot is a vaccine, right?” said the host. Sometimes vaccines took decades to develop, he said. There was an already-existing but growing anti-vaccine culture in the U.S.

“What are the challenges?” asked the host. “Where are we at with the vaccine? And how do we kind of solve this anti-vax culture that’s developing in our country?”

“You know, I’m really glad you asked this one,” Gupta said.

He paused, choosing his answer carefully.

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He had always chosen his words carefully, deliberately, tailoring his words to the audience at hand. He’d grown used to living in the public spotlight.

So when Gupta became eligible for the vaccine In December, he chose to get the shot live on [The Today Show](#) with Fagley, from Virginia Mason’s ICU.

The two met at Virginia Mason at 5:30 a.m., sat in a dark room and talked about what message they should send. They had these talks every so often, Fagley said, seeing how they could make hard, scientific truth palatable for a wide audience.

The TV show went live. Fagley received his shot. The seven-day average for new cases was at an all-time high and would peak [again](#) weeks later. Months would pass, the rollout would continue, Biden would replace Trump, businesses would reopen more, Gupta would shift his message to vaccine incentives for younger Americans, push the U.S. to donate more doses to the global vaccination effort and informally advise the Seattle Seahawks - the [only](#) NFL team to go through the season virus-free - on how to avoid Covid.

That was all to come.

“For folks who are watching or listening who might be scared or skeptical, what’s your message to them as you get ready to get your vaccine as well?” asked co-host Craig Melvin.

His message was, and is, that the vaccine is safe and effective. It will keep people out of ICU's across the country, reopen businesses and kickstart the economy. The shot, he would say, is the only way out of the pandemic.

“You know Craig, I’m really glad that you asked that.”