

**‘A born leader’: Vin Gupta seeks to bridge gap between medicine and communication, engage public in conversation on COVID-19**

When Vin Gupta veered off the beaten path on his way to practice medicine, it wasn’t because he had a plan.

While his peers followed the typical trajectory for aspiring doctors — medical school, supplementary training and a career in clinical practice — Gupta opted for a less traditional route, going on to join the U.S. Air Force Medical Corps and to earn his masters’ in public administration and international relations.

“I didn’t enter life or these various roles with some grand strategy,” he said. “But what I did realize I enjoyed was just understanding different perspectives — understanding how different sectors worked and how they all impacted public health.”

Now an interdisciplinary physician and researcher, Gupta has become a leading voice on the COVID-19 pandemic and related issues. As a regular contributor to major news outlets including *NBC News* and the *New York Times*, Gupta seeks to inform the general public of the facts behind the pandemic.

Gupta’s experience in different industries, including as a professor at the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation and principal scientist at Amazon,

allows him to speak with nuance and depth on public-health issues, such as how to get tested for COVID-19 or how to keep families safe amid the pandemic.

“It’s allowed me to add some degree of detail and to be able to speak to the issues that matter to all of us with, hopefully, some degree of a newer perspective,” Gupta said. “You can go on air and you can say something, it can be very mundane — or you can try to make it real for somebody.”

### **A communicator for the masses**

Amelia Apfel, media-relations officer at the UW Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, said she was struck by how communicative Gupta is from the first time she met him.

“He’s just an incredibly collaborative, warm, intelligent person,” Apfel said. “... He’s always paying attention to what you’re saying, he’s always listening, he has really smart questions — he’s very thoughtful.”

Though he believes he still has a long way to go to become a better communicator, Gupta said he has tried to be simple and effective in communicating basic to complex healthcare concepts to the public during the pandemic.

Gupta said he had to seek out an education in communications because medical schools do not teach their students how to speak effectively to the masses — even though the healthcare

industry desperately needs people who can communicate in lay terms, and not complicated medical jargon.

“Think about how much that would have helped if we had it from day one, early on in this pandemic,” he said. “Think about all the strife, all the confusion that could have been averted.”

Gupta has also become a trusted adviser of the NFL’s Seattle Seahawks and other popular sports teams on issues related to the pandemic. He said speaking with world-class athletes was a privilege because even just the act of engagement between them shows others the importance of talking and learning about the coronavirus, vaccinating against it and more.

“I may not have changed minds initially, but the goal here is to just get people to pay attention — to ask probing questions to seek more information,” Gupta said. “And I think that’s a win.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on Gupta’s adept ability as a communicator, Apfel said, proving it to be one of his greatest strengths.

“Dr. Gupta is really an exceptional person and an exceptional communicator,” Apfel said. “... I think he really has done just tremendous work during the pandemic.”

Ali Mokdad, a professor and colleague of Gupta’s at the UW Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, said in a written statement that Gupta has exceptional communication skills.

“His personal style shows that he cares, and that he is doing everything he does to help and improve the situation,” Mokdad said. “This is why he is so effective and the right person to have working on COVID-19 and other health topics.”

He added that Gupta is always willing to step in and help others.

“Dr. Gupta is also a highly intelligent but down to earth and caring person,” Mokdad said. “He is like your brother or cousin, someone you feel that you can trust and have known for a long time. He is truly a born leader.”

### **Foregoing the ‘preset trajectory’**

Fifteen years into his career, Gupta said he has found himself in a “weird space.”

With the goal of being a medical analyst for a major news outlet, Gupta said most people probably would not move to Seattle, Washington, like he did. His expertise as a lung doctor with a military and policy-based background, however, primed him to speak comfortably to the public on present issues like COVID-19, he said.

“If you don’t have that competence or you’re not viewed as credible to be speaking on these issues, you’re not going to be as confident,” he said. “And so I leveraged that background in cross-disciplinary training — intentional training in [communications] — and it all came together in a way that I could never have expected or planned on.”

Mokdad said in a statement that Gupta's experience in general medicine and treating COVID-19 patients, combined with his knowledge of health metrics, set him up to be an expert on coronavirus trends, drivers and containment measures.

"He is a superb MD and scientist and a pleasure to work with," Mokdad said. "He has very innovative ideas and is always engaged in thinking about what is next."

Nevertheless, Gupta said an unexpected and uncertain aspect of his role as a communicator has been the moments in which people strongly disagree with or criticize him.

"You learn to live with that," he said. "You learn to develop thick skin, and so it's been interesting. And I think because it's been organic, and because I've been able to stay true to myself and just lean in on areas that I feel really comfortable in, I've felt like I've been able to thrive."

Gupta took a risk at the start of his career when he chose not to pursue a more traditional path in medicine. Very few people make that decision after years of medical training because of the uncertainty surrounding its outcome, Gupta said, but he's glad that he did.

"The thing that I've appreciated more than anything has been not following a preset trajectory," he said. "... I've been making it up as I go. I've been trying to do what feels right. I try to stay authentic and genuine to what I believe in."