

Dr. Vin Gupta rises as leader in public health messaging amid COVID-19

On some days, Dr. Vin Gupta is a regular doctor. On others, he trades in his scrubs, stethoscope and patient list for a suit, microphone and national television audience.

With hundreds of TV appearances since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gupta has become a familiar face to Americans who have kept up to date with the public health crisis.

As a physician-scientist, policy advisor and military officer, the NBC news analyst has had a career rich in cross-disciplinary experience, allowing him to speak on pressing topics with varying perspectives.

“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,” Gupta said.

Gupta’s on-air appearances are accompanied by his strong sense of confidence and authenticity. But it’s his messaging tactics, his ability to turn complicated concepts into digestible information, that has made him thrive as a public figure.

For long, the public health space didn’t require an effective communications strategy because it made suggestions to people’s lives rather than establish rules. “You shouldn’t smoke cigarettes.” “You shouldn’t go in tanning beds.” “You shouldn’t eat too much sugar.”

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, suggestions became orders. “Wear a mask.” “Stay at home.” “Do not travel.” People wanted answers, and they didn’t want to go to medical school in order to understand them.

From masking to antibodies, Gupta has answered the public’s questions without the use of complicated jargon or uncertainty. His twitter account has turned into a public forum for users to ask about the vaccine and voice their hesitations.

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“Not all heroes wear capes, some wear white coats,” one user writes, attaching a photo of Gupta on their home TV screen.

The Harvard-trained pulmonologist said one of his biggest challenges throughout the pandemic has been combatting the false claims, dangerous advice and conspiracy theories that other public figures have paid heed to. In a way, he sees the spread of misinformation as an epidemic of its own.

“I’ve been angry, outraged at times, by what has been said from our highest elected leaders all the way down, frankly, to just the confusion that our nation’s most trusted scientists will unintentionally propagate,” Gupta said.

Emily Gee, senior economist of health policy at the Center for American Progress, said it’s valuable for networks to give platforms to doctors like Gupta who use their prominence and credibility “to do good.”

“There are certain messengers that communities trust more than others,” Gee said. “To have medical professionals delivering messages can be a lot more powerful than politicians or people who normally aren’t in a place of authority on healthcare issues.”

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Spinning wheels of passing gurneys. Whispering of students and lead pencils hitting paper. Politicians clearing their throat before a speech. For Gupta, each workday sounds different.

In addition to being a critical care pulmonologist at the Virginia Mason Medical Center, he’s a term member on the Council of Foreign Relations, a professor at the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation and most recently, the Chief Medical Officer for Amazon.

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His published works navigate topics such as pandemic response, healthcare reform, the vaping crisis, gun control and the impacts of climate change on human health.

There's a commonly followed path for aspiring doctors — finishing medical school, completing training, becoming a fulltime clinician — that acts as their roadmap to success.

Gupta's multifaceted career is the product of him evading that preset trajectory.

“Moving away from that path creates some uncertainty because there aren't mentors that you can look to and say, ‘well I want to be like x or y person,’” Gupta said. “Very few people that go through many years of medical training suddenly want to move off that well-worn path to something that's different and so there's some risk there.”

For the past decade, Gupta has served in the U.S. Air Force as a deployable critical care aerospace physician with the 446th Aeromedical Staging Squadron at Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

As a military doctor, he assisted with the U.S. State Department's African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership initiative, helping to lead health-crisis training in partner military nations in Africa.

Despite being trained in pandemic preparedness prior to the onset of COVID-19, Gupta said none of it was sufficient — and that the nation needs vastly more resources to combat biowarfare and pandemics, what he describes as being “the greatest threat to global security.”

CNN analyst Dr. Mark Hertling, who spent four decades as a soldier, commander and lieutenant general in the U.S. Army., has been a mentor to Gupta as he's adjusted to his newfound prominence.

Hertling said Gupta's military experience has played a massive role in sculpting him into someone the American people can look to in a time of crisis.

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“What makes him so dependable is the fact that he’s a good leader,” Hertling said.

During a time when the healthcare system is being overtaken by administrators, figures like Hertling and Gupta are empowering other doctors to not relegate their role in leading the field.

“Vin and I both believe, as do a lot of other doctors, that it’s time for physicians to take over the stewardship of the profession, to help the American people a little bit more than they are right now,” Hertling said.

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No amount of training could have prepared Gupta for life in the public eye, which has not only gained him a loyal following but also put a target on his back from those who believe the virus is a hoax.

Gupta’s no longer a stranger to social media hate, death threats or police reports. It’s not something a doctor generally needs to prepare for in their line of work, and with a wife and four-year-old son at home, those moments have proved difficult.

“You learn to live with it, you learn to develop thick skin,” Gupta said.

Dr. Ali Mokdad, professor at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, has worked with Gupta for the past few years and said his unique work experiences set him up to be an expert on the virus’ trends, drivers and measures to contain it. But most importantly, Mokdad said Gupta is committed to doing what’s right.

“He is somebody who cares, somebody who’s willing to drop everything to help,” Mokdad said. “This is why he’s the right person to have working on the pandemic.”

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Mokdad described Gupta as being like a brother, adding that when he met him years ago, before the world was upended by the COVID-19 pandemic, he knew Gupta was “a natural born leader.”

“You work with someone who is very smart and it impresses you how sharp they are, or you work with somebody who’s a decent human being and you’re impressed by their character,” Mokdad said. “You rarely work with someone like Vin, who’s both.”