

Head: MSNBC's Dr. Vin Gupta urges health professionals, policymakers to learn from COVID's mistakes

Physician and health policy expert Dr. Vin Gupta expressed cautious optimism for the world's return to pre-pandemic normalcy at a Monday press conference, but warned of dire consequences if governments do not prepare for the next deadly strike - and fast.

Gupta, a Seattle-based lung specialist and health policy analyst for NBC and MSNBC, said he believes the worst of the pandemic is now behind us. But the past year shined a spotlight on systemic struggles to respond to a critical public health threat like COVID-19, Gupta said, and his optimism does not extend to a future where he envisions global contagion as the top threat to national security.

"There will be a summer reprieve, and I am optimistic for the short term," Gupta told reporters. "But I'm overall quite pessimistic about our ability to respond to something like this in the future, because I don't think our capabilities or pandemic preparedness have fundamentally changed all that much in the last 24 months."

There are no more ICU beds available nationwide than there were at the beginning of 2020, nor any greater stockpiles of N95 masks accessible to the general public, Gupta said. If another, deadlier health scare were to strike, Gupta does not think the U.S. or its global partners could weather the storm.

“Our healthcare system really let us down in a lot of ways,” Gupta said. “Just from a material and human resources standpoint, our healthcare system is limited as to what it can do in the setting of a crisis. So then it should scare us all that if a pandemic arises that even has a 1% case fatality rate - and you can’t tell me that is impossible - we are in trouble.”

Addressing those shortcomings will take an interdisciplinary approach from scientists, lawmakers and budget writers across all levels of government, Gupta said, starting from a “humble” place that acknowledges where systems fall short and addresses them in practical, achievable ways.

Gupta is not alone in foreseeing catastrophic consequences if recent warning signs are ignored. An international panel of experts commissioned by the World Health Organization argued in a report last month that COVID-19 failures should serve as a “Chernobyl moment” in pandemic preparedness, PBS reported. The panel’s report called for swift improvements to transparency and funding within WHO and for wealthy countries to share vaccine stockpiles with poorer nations, areas in which Gupta feels the U.S. bears a responsibility to step up and lead the way towards progress.

“I think it’s the obligation of the United States to do everything in its power to vaccinate the rest of the world, if not for humanitarian considerations then if only for the national security interest,” Gupta said. “It would make sense for our country to invest in and pursue those policies... to mitigate against the rise of a dangerous pathogen that could put the world back to

day zero. There should be much greater urgency - the rate at which we're going isn't going to cut it.”

Sources:

Press conference with Dr. Vin Gupta, June 7, 2021

“International panel calls for overhaul of pandemic preparedness efforts,” PBS NewsHour, May 14, 2021

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/international-panel-calls-for-overhaul-of-pandemic-preparedness-efforts>