

Head: For physician and scientist Dr. Vin Gupta, COVID communication came naturally

To hear him tell it, Dr. Vin Gupta did not set out to become one of the nation's foremost medical experts during a global pandemic. He's primarily a clinician, he'll say, more suited to caring for critically ill patients in his capacity as a physician than he is to having his advice broadcast into millions of American homes.

But ask any of his colleagues, and they'll tell you Gupta was an obvious fit for the job. A lung specialist and affiliate assistant professor at University of Washington's Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, Gupta has spent his career striving to understand the myriad intersections of medicine, science and data.

Now, in his role as a medical analyst for NBC and MSNBC, Gupta offers the hard facts about anything from mask mandates to types of vaccines with the fine balance of measured professionalism and heartfelt compassion you'd expect from your family doctor. His hundreds of television appearances over the course of the pandemic have made him one of the most instantly recognizable faces of the medical response to COVID-19.

It's been difficult - and often deeply frustrating - to cut through the noise of countless other opinions and misinformation populating the media atmosphere during the pandemic, Gupta said. The weighty position he holds now isn't one he envisioned himself having when he started his career. But he hopes, nonetheless, that more like him will step up to the job.

In all of the training Gupta received to become a doctor - plus two master's degrees from Cambridge and Harvard - there was never a class that taught him to communicate what he'd learned to those without the benefit of a medical degree. He sought that training out because he felt there was a better way to educate people about their own health.

Complex vocabulary and hefty scientific concepts are par for the course in his field, Gupta said, and often, medical professionals throw around jargon just to show they know their stuff.

"People don't want to have a complicated medical journal rehashed to them," Gupta said. "They just want basic concepts communicated clearly."

Gupta's ability to distill mind-bogglingly complex concepts like vaccine efficacy and disease variants down into informative soundbites is part of what makes him the best person for this job, according to Dr. Ali Mokdad, chief strategist of population health at UW and Gupta's colleague at IHME.

"He's a bright physician but he is like your brother or cousin, someone you feel that you can trust or that you've known for a long time," Mokdad said. "His personal style shows that he cares, and that he is doing everything he does to help and improve the situation."

Mokdad is not at all surprised by the role Gupta has taken on during the pandemic. His passion for sharing knowledge combined with his interlocking real-life experiences as an ICU doctor and

global health researcher translate to a “star quality” that makes him accessible to all audiences, Mokdad said.

Gupta credits his diverse real-life resume with giving him the gravitas viewers want to see in a health expert. It’s also given him the confidence needed to assert truths to millions in a media environment that’s sometimes been less than welcoming to those facts.

Gupta said he’s been the target of everything from harsh tweets from Tucker Carlson to actual death threats since his rise to fame, raising safety concerns for his wife and young son. But despite the stress that comes with the job, it’s absolutely crucial to Gupta that more medical professionals follow his lead.

Had the American healthcare and media systems been more in tune at the beginning of the pandemic, Gupta thinks countless lives could have been saved.

“It’s really astonishing to me how I think we just missed the boat on effectively communicating things that we should be communicating to the masses,” Gupta said. “The healthcare system failed us in a lot of ways, but one that’s under our immediate control is how we communicate to people in a crisis.”

For the world to be prepared to combat the next global health threat - and he is certain more are coming within our lifetimes - communications training needs to be just as high a priority as reinforcing medical infrastructure and stockpiling N95 masks, Gupta said.

It's unlikely that future science communicators will get the kind of intensive on-the-job training Gupta received over the course of the pandemic, nor is it likely another media figure with his tireless passion and wealth of knowledge will come along anytime soon. It seems uncanny that anyone could have prepared for COVID-19 - that anyone could have had the exact, perfect combination of experience and effusiveness needed to persuade a fractured country to follow his lead.

But if it was going to be anyone, it was going to be Gupta. In his work as a board member for Northwest Harvest, a network of Seattle-area food banks, he's astounded fellow volunteers with his foresight and sheer dedication to his many jobs.

Gupta had served on the board of a Boston-area food bank while at Harvard and became dedicated to the anti-hunger movement despite his packed schedule, said Northwest Harvest CEO Thomas Reynolds.

"He is someone who clearly sees his role as one to bring awareness to issues that matter on a national platform," Reynolds said. "He genuinely cares about the people around him, specifically people who struggle with hunger."

Gupta never seems to have been one for free time, even before he was appearing on cable news from early morning to the late show. Reynolds recalls a time when a quarterly board meeting

conflicted with Gupta's training obligations as a critical care physician in the U.S. Air Force Reserves.

Another person might understandably have excused himself given the circumstances, but Gupta still showed up to the Zoom meeting in full military fatigues, Reynolds said. It showed Reynolds just how seriously Gupta takes all of his many duties, often all at the same time.

Gupta may not have seen this career path coming for him, but to those who have worked with him over the years, it's evident this is what he was built for.

"This is the Vin I know," Mokdad said. "He is innovative and always thinking ahead - this is why he's so effective, why he is a born leader."