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**The unlikely force shaping Amazon's health plans: A veteran, doctor, and TV persona with big ideas for tech**



By [Erin Brodwin](#) June 14, 2021



Vin Gupta at the University of Washington campus in Seattle. *Jovelle Tamayo for STAT*

If you know the name Vin Gupta, chances are it's because he tends to spar with politicians and others spouting anti-science rhetoric, and to as vast an audience as possible. He's a medical commentator on NBC and MSNBC, a practicing intensive care physician, a public health researcher, a faculty member at the University of Washington — and a voracious tweeter.

So it seems unlikely that someone so outward-facing has a day job at, of all places, Amazon, a notoriously tight-lipped tech behemoth that is rocketing full force into health care delivery.

But the company appears to be betting on Gupta, who has a full-time role as its chief medical officer, to shepherd Amazon's efforts out into the open. In the past year and a half, Gupta has taken on a portfolio that is far broader than he or Amazon could have imagined when he was recruited, pre-pandemic, to help steer Amazon Care, the company's virtual-first health care program.

Gupta is overseeing the company's pandemic response, which includes everything from diagnostics to public health communications. The pandemic has put him in a vital — and uniquely public-facing — role for the medical forays of a company that has an ironclad reputation for secrecy. While Gupta may not have a seat within every health care team at Amazon — be it in [pharmacy](#), [virtual-first primary care](#), [wearables](#), [diagnostics](#), or [cloud services](#) — he has, at one point or another, weighed in on many of those efforts.

Besides balancing all his roles, Gupta's challenge is to make sure his public persona helps — and doesn't damage or detract from — his work for Amazon.

“Especially because I have my role at Amazon, especially because I represent a public university, I have to remember that there are guardrails,” he told STAT in an interview. “It's tough to not be unfiltered.”

In January 2020, just as Gupta was beginning to find his footing at the tech giant in Seattle, the first person in the U.S. was diagnosed with Covid-19. It was a 35-year-old man who had traveled home to Seattle after visiting Wuhan, China. Shortly afterward, case counts in the city and its surrounding suburbs began to climb. Within a four-week window, [39 residents](#) of the long term nursing care facility Life Care Center, in the Seattle suburb of Kirkland, died from the virus.

Gupta, with a background in global health and disease surveillance, quickly found himself “dual hitting” for Amazon Care and in an emerging position leading the company's pandemic response. By February, he was helping to [track the virus' local spread](#), working with a team that included public health officials from Seattle's King County, representatives from what would become the Seattle Coronavirus Assessment Network (SCAN), and the Gates Foundation.

With Gupta leading the charge, Amazon began [delivering Covid-19 tests](#) to people's homes in an attempt to get a clear picture of current case counts. It was also the company's first foray into the lucrative [market of at-home diagnostics](#), an area the company would later expand upon.

“I think they've recognized that it's an asset to have me out there helping to lead on our workplace health and safety measures and to be helping to guide our strategy,” Gupta said. “When Covid hit, it just felt like I was in the right place at the right time.”

In Gupta's view, the effort serves as a prime example of the ways in which big tech should operate amid a public health crisis. At the time, Seattle's public health departments and SCAN had created a road map for assessing the spread of the virus; Amazon was delivering the tests that made that possible.

“We rounded out a partnership that frankly I think could be a paradigm for what the country could do in a future pandemic,” Gupta said, “where you have an Amazon that's the middle- and last-mile muscle.”

To Gupta, those sorts of partnerships are the sweet spot for some of the work tech giants like Amazon are doing. He envisions more partnerships between tech giants and health systems, as well as with universities, nonprofits, and public health entities.

“I think any company, whether it’s Amazon or anyone else, needs to embrace the health care system as it exists,” Gupta said. “I think there’s such an opportunity to be complementary versus completely disruptive.”

If any business knows how to successfully court the average consumer, it’s Amazon. Gupta wants to see that skill — and others like it, from agility to design know-how — put to use augmenting brick-and-mortar health care facilities in a way that enables more preventive, continuous care.

But the ability to successfully target the customer hunting for sheets or nail polish is vastly different from the skill needed to establish the kinds of trust necessary for a patient’s care. Generally speaking, consumers remain skeptical of tech giants including Amazon, particularly when it comes to their health care ambitions and how they’ll use sensitive medical information. According to a [2020 survey](#) from venture firm Rock Health, only 11% of those surveyed were willing to share their health data with tech companies. Of those, just over half said they were open to the idea of sharing their data with Amazon.

“The trust imperative has come front and center for health care in 2021,” said Arielle Trzcinski, senior health care analyst at Forrester. “Amazon, along with other health care companies, must refine their understanding of the consumer journey to account for the complexity of individual healthcare experiences.” Going forward, she said, it will be key for Amazon to “balance dependability, accountability, and empathy.”

And while the burden of building that trust can’t — and won’t — be carried by Gupta alone, it is a hill he and colleagues will have to climb if Amazon wants to truly carve out a space for itself in health care.

“My opinion of him going to Amazon is that it’s better he than most,” said James Beck, a longtime mentor of Gupta’s and a critical care and pulmonary sciences professor at the University of Colorado. “I don’t think he’s afraid to say, for example, this is being underemphasized or that is being overemphasized.”



As Amazon's chief medical officer, Gupta is overseeing the company's pandemic response, which includes everything from diagnostics to public health communications. *Jovelle Tamayo for STAT*

From an early age, Gupta saw a job in health care as a public duty. Watching his mother, a neonatologist, care for premature infants in the U.S. and in India, he knew he wanted to make his way into medicine, too. Still, his journey into the field was somewhat nontraditional: Before embarking on a career as a pulmonologist, he joined the Air Force.

His mother “was horrified,” Gupta recalled. She refused to speak to him for months, but gradually came around, he said. As an Air Force medical technician, Gupta's work involved supporting physicians in emergency settings — a role to which his mother could relate. He also volunteered to support humanitarian health missions in countries including Cambodia, where he would spend six weeks doing supportive tasks like running lab samples.

The work inspired him to study a range of global public health issues, from the burden of conditions like heart disease and cancer in Northeast China to policies for seasonal influenza vaccination in Southeast Asia. He went on to medical school in New York at Columbia, and then earned master's degrees in international relations and public administration from Cambridge and Harvard.

During medical school, he spent two years at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention studying emerging pathogens. Although he didn't know it then, his soon-to-be wife was in China at the same time doing a medical rotation. The two were traveling separately for Chinese New Year when,

thanks to some nudging by mutual friends, they met in Bali. Gupta keeps a statue he brought home from there of Vishnu, the Hindu god tasked with protecting the universe from destruction, mounted on the wall of his office.

Over time, Gupta has earned a reputation among his colleagues as a dependable and trustworthy pulmonologist. Ali Mokdad, one of Gupta's mentors and a colleague of his at the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, said that he and colleagues have quipped openly about not wanting to travel during the pandemic because being outside the area would mean Gupta couldn't take care of them if they contracted the virus.

"I said, if I'm going to get Covid, I want Vin to take care of me. I don't want to be anywhere else," said Mokdad. "You trust him with your life. That's just who he is."

Today, Gupta serves as a Major in the Air Force Reserve Medical Service Corps as part of a critical care transport team that can be called upon at any time to act as a mobile ICU for people injured in the line of duty.

Gupta admits he is looking forward to spending more of his days at home with his wife and son when the pandemic subsides. For now, that's proven challenging. After all, it is a respiratory pandemic, he said.

"Work-life balance is overrated," Gupta said dismissively, stifling a laugh.

When the worst of the crisis abates, there will be more time for Magna-Tiles, his son's favorite toy, and, hopefully, dressing up for a real Halloween. (Last fall, they dressed up as characters from the children's book "Dragons Love Tacos." Gupta and his wife wore dragon masks; his son and their dog were outfitted as tacos.)

In the meantime, in a typical work week during the pandemic, Gupta sees his time divided between Amazon, his night and weekend intensive care shifts at hospitals in Washington state and Arizona — usually five to seven a month — and his all-hours news appearances.

To Gupta, public health communication is an essential part of the job — he spent years as the TV spokesperson for the University of Washington, talking to NBC and MSNBC viewers about everything from vaping to gun violence. When he accepted the Amazon position, he wasn't certain exactly how he would continue in that role. But over time, he has convinced the tech giant to trust him, in large part by showing that disseminating factual information about the pandemic is a worthy public good — and one that doesn't distract too much from his day job.

"Tweeting is usually pretty time-effective," Gupta said.

But being a public face during the Covid-19 pandemic is no walk in the park. Although he has been adamant, in all of his talking points, about sticking to the science, even that kind of commentary has run the risk of coming across as partisan.

In December 2020, he appeared on MSNBC to warn viewers they still needed to take precautions — like limiting travel and wearing masks in some scenarios — after being vaccinated. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) [came after him on Twitter](#), calling him a member of “a bizarre, lunatic, totalitarian cult” and going on to say his appearance was “only focused on absolute gov[ernment] control of every aspect of our lives.” Right-wing Fox News host Tucker Carlson joined in on the conflict, penning a [blog post](#) about “censorship” of scientific knowledge by “Big Tech” and accusing Gupta of being a shill for the cause.

Gupta — who said has received multiple death threats since appearing on the news roughly 700 times in the past 16 months to discuss Covid-19 — asked Twitter to label Cruz’s tweet as misleading, but never received a response. A spokesperson for the company said in order for a Tweet to merit a label, it had to meet several criteria including being demonstrably incorrect and likely to cause serious harm.

Beck, Gupta’s mentor, said he admired his tenacity in taking on such a public role at a time when doing so can bring an often vitriolic response, and for always bringing the perspectives of frontline health workers and public health experts to his messaging.

“That’s why he’s so good,” Beck said. “He’s always reaching out to say, ‘Hey, you’re on the frontlines, what do you think?’ You can’t do policy without it crossing a line into politics, but he’s one of those people who can kind of walk the tightrope.”



As his position has evolved over the past year and a half, Gupta has taken on new roles at Amazon, including handling the internal messaging for the company’s 1.3 million employees on issues including Covid-19 testing, vaccination, and other health and safety issues. He might spend a morning speaking to the 5,000 members of Amazon’s workplace safety team and an afternoon talking to Whole Foods’ 105,000 staff or the 40,000-plus people who work at Amazon Web Services.

These duties also put Gupta front and center with Amazon’s employees. In the past, the company’s efforts to protect staff’s health have come under fire, particularly during the pandemic. When dozens of workers at Amazon’s warehouses were falling ill with Covid-19 last year, reports began to emerge that the company was inadequately protecting them — that it hadn’t supplied enough protective equipment; that it wasn’t listening to their concerns; and that it wasn’t compensating them properly.

Gupta pushed back adamantly on those criticisms.

“Having now seen how the military and other health care systems have been responding to the pandemic, in relative terms, what Amazon has done ... I just don’t know any other company that’s done things like on-site, on-demand testing and on-site vaccination efforts at 300 different locations across the country,” he said.

Even before the public health crisis, Gupta had a front-row seat to how tech giants were working to push into health care. Since 2018, he has consulted for Apple, where he spent 10 months working on pulmonary-related features for the Series 6 Apple Watch. In Gupta’s view, tech companies are only just beginning to carve out their role in the delivery and transformation of health care. Taking a full-time role at Amazon “was premised on the notion that people want to consume care conveniently and ... in the convenience of their home,” said Gupta.

That play for more convenient care is apparent in the burgeoning business of at-home diagnostics, an area where Gupta sees growing potential for Amazon. One of Gupta’s more recent pushes at Amazon involves vetting rapid point-of-care tests from third party manufacturers.

Gupta told STAT he thinks the company could easily expand to offer usability studies for those companies, providing statistics on their accuracy and reliability, for example. Gupta also sees potential in fusing Amazon’s testing capabilities together under a common label.

“Why not just wrap that all into one sort of cohesive service, where we could provide a test using our logistics operation and then run that test at the labs we’ve spent so much time and resources building?” Gupta said. “That’s definitely what is forming the 30,000-foot vision.”

Gupta also sees logic in eventually combining Amazon’s health care capabilities in testing, virtual-first care, pharmacy, and wearables under a common label or vertical, such as Amazon Care. (While Amazon does have a dedicated team focused on diagnostics, an Amazon spokesperson said the other ideas were purely hypothetical.)

Gupta, of course, is used to generating lofty ideas as an academic and being blunt as a medical commentator. As for whether he will be able to use those characteristics to steer Amazon’s health efforts into the public eye, that remains to be seen.

“He comes to you and says ‘we can do more,’” said Mokdad. “He’s not picking low-hanging fruit, either. He’s picking big ideas, he wants to do it.”

## About the Author



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