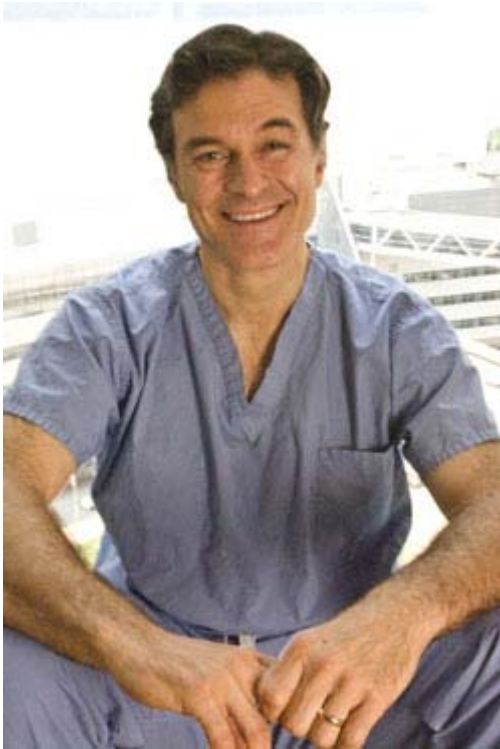


The Great and Powerful Dr. Oz

BY LIZZY RATNER



James Hamilton

He makes your heart pound: the dashing Dr. Oz.

On a steamy Sunday in early August, at an hour known as church-time across certain swaths of the U.S., the famed heart surgeon and health guru, Dr. Mehmet Oz, strutted about a stage at the Javits Convention Center, preaching his own kind of gospel.

He was speaking to an audience made up mostly of women—middle-aged types with wide waists, heaving hearts, and the look of worship on their faces. Many of them had seen him on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the dashing doctor in the sky-blue scrubs, and like latter-day pilgrims they had driven from New Jersey, Rochester, even Chicago just to attend his workshop, “It’s All About You: Be the World Expert on Your Body.”

They weren’t disappointed. As he launched into a parable about the ravages of heart disease—a horror scenario that he narrated with the help of two JumboTrons and an animation of a giant, atherosclerotic artery—it was clear that he had achieved an extraordinary feat, even by medical standards: he had managed to wrap Deepak Chopra, Dr. McDreamy and C. Everett Koop

into a single, well-tailored suit.

“BOOM!” he shouted into his microphone as the JumboTrons turned red, and an angry mass of platelets and fibrinogen—a Clot—fully and fatally blocked off the artery.

“You just saw the leading cause of death in the Western world. That’s what a heart attack looks like!” said Dr. Oz, whose official title is director of the Cardiovascular Institute at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia. “And you know what? It doesn’t take years to happen. The actual closure of the artery takes place in minutes to hours.”

The audience sat in silent, panicked attention. A few women scribbled notes, but mostly they just stared, wide-eyed and intent, as Dr. Oz continued his lesson, warning and expounding until finally he was ready for the moment of redemption—the moment when he declared that for all the damage that people might have done to their bodies, they can still be saved.

“Yes!” he declared, his voice boyish and excited. “We dig the foundation for bad health over decades, but we actually influence our health much more short term. The things we’re going to talk to you about today, the action steps, if you act on them, within three months, *three months*, we can measure a difference in your life expectancy.

“It’s a *profoundly* important power that you have,” he said.

Hallelujah!

DR. OZ HAS BEEN PREACHING this gospel of health and self-help for several years now, injecting it into books, crowds and television shows like some gooey, life-promising vaccine. Leaning on his many, well-polished laurels, he’s moved beyond his area of specialty—the heart—to explain the ins and outs, ups and downs, of the entire body. His message is a seductively simple one—eat a little less, exercise a little more, get a second opinion—though at times it seems like two or three parts common sense to one part medical expertise (with a dose of spiritual alterna-speak thrown in for good measure).

His ambition is huge, his bank account is bulging; increasingly, he seems like the TV doctor who also plays one in real life instead of the other way around. Yet his ultimate message isn’t about him, it’s about you: He wants nothing more, he says, than to create a “movement” of Americans who recognize that only they are the masters of their health.

“For the American public,” he told *The Observer* during an interview in his office, “I hope the epiphany is that, yes, we’ve made huge advances in science, but it’s not the Holy Grail. It’s not by itself going to take you to the Promised Land. Only *you* can do that.”

The Promised Land. It’s an enticing concept, no matter how you get there, and thus far, the good doctor has been doing a fine job of winning converts to his cause. He hasn’t quite created a movement just yet, but thanks to an uncanny ability to combine medical skill with marketing savvy (he has an M.B.A. as well as an M.D.), he has done what few members of his inward-looking medical profession have managed to do—he has turned himself into an industry.

Indeed, the 47-year-old surgeon, who was once named *People Magazine*’s “Sexiest Doctor,” is everywhere these days: beaming from the flaps of his best-selling books, *YOU: The Owner’s Manual* and *YOU: On a Diet*; lecturing his less-successful Harvard comrades at their 25th college reunion; praising his employer, New York-Presbyterian Hospital, in local radio spots; writing a men’s health column in *Esquire*; and, of course, touring the country with his co-guru, Dr. Michael Roizen, a Cleveland Clinic anesthesiologist who earned his motivational-speaker stripes by coming up with a way to test people’s RealAge®, and who advises people to “get control” of their genes by walking 30 minutes a day and learning to manage stress (which, he notes, adds 32 years to your age). Dr. Oz’s Reiki-master wife, Lisa, is also part of the act, discussing “energy, spirit, and relationships.”

Call it Oz-Fest II.

All this in addition to the hefty amount of time he spends instructing his good pal Oprah Winfrey about how to “get younger and healthier,” warning against the dangers of belly fat and delimiting the proper shape of poop. (You have to know? It should be S-shaped.) It’s a service that has earned him both a place among that circle of helpfulness known as “Oprah and Friends” and even a special title: Ms. Winfrey has dubbed him “America’s doctor.”

“Dr. Oz recognizes that the spiritual is connected with the medical,” Ms. Winfrey told *The Observer*, via her publicist. “I love him because he likes to combine Eastern and Western medicine like acupuncture and massage. He has a true passion for the human body and has helped me understand things about the way it works.”

Dr. Oz is quick to return the favor. During our interview and his lecture, he dropped Ms. Winfrey’s name reverently into conversation, like a communion wafer or a slot-machine coin, calling her a “wonderful teacher” and the “best.” He used her purple “Oprah-patented” surgical gloves to cradle enlarged hearts and “light, fluffy” lungs during the show-and-tell section of Oz-Fest. And in one of the more creative acts of co-branding perhaps ever concocted, he used her heart—quite literally—to educate his audience about, well, Oprah’s heart.

“This is the inside of someone’s chest,” Dr. Oz told his Javits Center audience as he pointed to a pulsing, three-dimensional image on the JumboTrons. “See the little ribs coming out of the side, and the heart? You may not recognize this person, but her name is Oprah Winfrey. That’s what Oprah’s heart looks like.” (From what we could tell, Oprah looked pretty good!)

Ms. Winfrey’s heart has done wonders for Dr. Oz’s cause, winning him converts and credibility among the vast, Oprah-mom demographic. “We’ve seen him on *Oprah*, and he’s very informative,” said Theresa Bosco, a 58-year-old grandma who took a seven-and-a-half-hour train ride all the way from Rochester, New York, just to hear her favorite TV doctor speak. “Being a cardiologist, I think he tells you how it really is.”

But some of his cardio-jock colleagues aren’t so sure about all of this Oz mania. They respect his technical skill, appreciate his way with a scalpel, but they sniff and cluck at his Doc America image.

For some, perhaps, it’s simply a case of good old-fashioned competitive envy. But for others it’s philosophical, a legacy of Arrowsmith—Sinclair Lewis’ tortured medical hero, not the hair-metal band—who stands as a kind of modern-day Hippocrates against the commercialization of medicine.

“I think there’s probably some sense in the cardiac surgical community that publicity-mongering is not consistent with our behavior,” said one prominent cardiothoracic surgeon who asked to remain anonymous. “We don’t think that a serious cardiac surgeon would hop on an airplane, fly to Chicago and take questions on commercial television about the treatment of urinary tract infections or other topics that are not pertinent to our profession.”

Then again, who else is urging middle-aged America to gut-bust its belly fat?

ON A HARRIED FRIDAY AFTERNOON two days before the Javits Center mega-conference, Dr. Oz sat behind his desk in the Milstein Hospital building, sharing his thoughts on life and medicine before rushing off to do the day’s surgery—a combined bypass-and-valve replacement job on a 60-year-old woman. He was dressed in his signature blue scrubs, the ones that *Oprah* audiences have come to know so well, but he looked different than the man people are used to seeing on TV. There was still the same angled chin, the same broad face that evokes Dick York on *Bewitched*. But his hair was tousled, his eyes gleaming green, and it was suddenly possible to see why a woman might actually *want* to have her chest cracked open by him.

"If I could be known as a teacher, I'd be happy," he said, his voice earnest, his hands clasped on the desk in front of him. "I love teaching, I always have.

"The big epiphany for me," he continued, "was that most of what I really need to do as a doctor—remember, the word "doctor" means "teacher"—most of what I need to do is to teach you to take better care of yourself. I mean, more than 50 percent of your ability to recover and live a long time after heart surgery is things you do, not me.

"So people have to take that mantle of responsibility on their shoulders. But"—and here he suddenly leaned forward—"in America, we have moved to a belief that the magic bullet of modern medicine will always cure us of our ills; that we can sprinkle a little bit of a statin drug on a kielbasa and we'll still be okay. And we have to change that."

Dr. Oz shifted in his chair. He had reached the heart of his philosophy—the part from which the Oz-tours, TV spots, and *YOU* books sprang—and he wanted to drive the point home.

Dr. Oz's philosophy emerged, he said, over years of treating patients who could have avoided the knife if only they had grasped their own essential power sooner—if only they had realized that "we don't have the free lunch, that there is no easy way of getting through this, that you have to be part of the equation," Dr. Oz said. As a theory, it sits comfortably alongside the self-help and medical empowerment manuals that have sprung up in health food stores, in alternative medicine Meccas and from the occasional Ayn Rand sympathizer. But it is also essentially Oz-ian, a product of his own specific DNA.

Dr. Oz was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, the son of two Turkish immigrants. (His father, the first Dr. Oz, was also a cardiothoracic surgeon.) From the start, he seems to have had a knack for success, an eerie ability to collect achievements the way other people collected one-night stands or baseball cards.

At Harvard, which he finished in three-and-a-half years, he was both a pre-med biology major *and* a member of the water polo and football teams (he played safety). During his graduate school years, he attended both the University of Pennsylvania's medical school—where he was voted class chairman and school president—as *well* as its business school, Wharton. As a surgeon at Columbia, he quickly gained a reputation as a talented researcher *and* as fleet-fingered surgeon—even as he held down a marriage, spawned four kids, and ran marathons. (To this day his blood pressure is 110 over 70, while his cholesterol is 160.)

It's no wonder he believes that people can master their fate.

"HE'S A PHENOMENAL SURGEON. Technically he's got excellent hands," said Dr. Mathew Williams, surgical director of cardiovascular transcatheter therapies at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia. "You hear the term "thinking outside the box" a lot, but he really epitomizes that. He's come up with a lot of innovative ways to tackle problems."

In fact, the only area that Dr. Oz has not yet conquered seems to be the grotty gladiators' ring of politics—though that area, too, might someday be Oz-ified. A self-described "moderate Republican" concerned with "fiscal and leadership issues," Dr. Oz has been active in his local Republican Party (in New Jersey) for several years, donated handsomely to G.O.P. candidates like Senators John McCain and Bill Frist and, when asked, readily acknowledged that the idea of elected office has crossed his mind. "I get asked all the time about it," he said. "I've always enjoyed leading people."

Should he choose to enter the electoral fray, Dr. Oz already has two icons whose political path he said he would like to follow: California bodybuilder-turned-actor-turned governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, whom he calls a "wonderful" guy and a "good

chess player too” (and whose picture sits proudly in Dr. Oz’s office alongside a bottle of wine the Governor gave him for moderating his health summit in July 2006); and Teddy Roosevelt, the original boot-strapping individualist.

“Teddy Roosevelt to me was the ideal Republican,” he said. “He was someone who felt strongly about the need for individuals to make the place work better without having someone tell them how to do it. But they had an obligation to do that as well. It wasn’t a favor for the country; it was an obligation as Americans.”

Has somebody been practicing his stump speech?

Still, obligations to Americans aside, it looks like the rise of Candidate Oz may still be a few years in the future. “Maybe down the road, if I learn my lessons well and people still think that I might be able to do it, I’d consider it,” he said. For now, his duty lies elsewhere—in supersizing the message of “wellness” and “vitality” that he teaches his patients every day in his office.

It lies, in other words, with *YOU*.

<http://www.nyobserver.com/2007/great-and-powerful-dr-oz>

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