



Health

Oprah Loves This Doctor

Heidi Brown 08.04.08, 4:00 PM ET



Mehmet Oz, relaxed and casual in a button-down shirt open at the neck, has just downed a salad of nuts, feta cheese and cranberries in the atrium cafeteria of a midtown Manhattan office building.

As he's leaving, two bubbly women in their mid-40s stop him, one with a camera in hand. "Can you take a picture with us?" she asks, practically grabbing the 48-year-old by the arm. He positions himself between the two and flashes a smile.

A renowned heart surgeon who is also a pal of Oprah Winfrey's, Oz has made it his mission to try to persuade lazy, overweight Americans to take control of their health, and he has become a celebrity in the process. In his time off from his three days a week performing heart transplants and mitral valve repairs at New York-Presbyterian Hospital, he has co-authored, with Michael Roizen, four bestselling books, and he has three more on the way. He has appeared on the Discovery Channel for five years, hosts a five-day-a-week radio show on XM Satellite Radio and has shown up regularly on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* since 2004. He commands a \$100,000 speaking fee.

Yet his star is about to burn even brighter. Starting in the fall of 2009, he will host an Oprah-backed syndicated daily TV talk show. Oprah the king-maker, having launched Rachael Ray and Dr. Phil to stardom, has anointed a new favorite. The deal could be worth \$30 million, most of it going to Oprah's Harpo Productions.

Oz has, besides the take-charge confidence and acuity of a surgeon, a talent for making complex ideas clear and simple. He also has sex appeal and a sense of showmanship. On Comedy Central's *Colbert Report* recently, a few minutes of plugging his new book turned into a whirlwind disquisition on intimate organs, as the usually unflappable Stephen Colbert sputtered in embarrassment. Oz recently ingested a capsule-like camera just so Oprah's audience could see, live, what the inside of a small intestine looks like.

"Dr. Oz recognizes that the spiritual is connected with the medical. I love him because he likes to combine Eastern and Western medicine, like acupuncture and massage," says Oprah. "He has a true passion for the human body and has helped me understand things about the way it works."

Yet he insists that none of this is for fame. "I do it because of how it makes me feel," he says of his health crusade. "Same with surgery. When families thank me, I'm respectful, but I don't feel comfortable. Not better or worse. When people say 'nice job' after a show, that's not why I do it."

All About Oz

The eldest son of Turkish immigrants, Oz was once a rebellious, hyper kid who needed extra help in elementary school. Kids in his hometown of Wilmington, Del., made fun of his name and picked fights with him. But when Oz was only 7, his father, who had gone from poverty in Turkey to a career in cardiovascular surgery in the U.S., demanded to know what he wanted to be when he grew up. Oz, who says he remembers the moment perfectly, realized that he wanted to be a surgeon too.

After he graduated from Harvard, he enrolled in a difficult double-degree program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and the Wharton business school, fig-

uring that medicine needed people who understood the problem of rising costs. He embraced the chance to study concrete subjects like anatomy and health care finance rather than the courses, such as philosophy, he'd taken as an undergraduate.

In his first year at medical school he met his future wife, who, he says, changed his life. Lisa Lemole, whose father was on the team that performed the first heart transplant in America, came from a family that subscribed to the teachings of Swedish scientist and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, who maintained that spirituality is as important as material life. They used alternative medicines, like arnica gel for sore muscles. "I began to see why healing required more than my 11-blade," Oz says.

At 33, after training in Paris under a renowned mitral valve surgeon, Oz went to work at the Columbia-Presbyterian Center of New York-Presbyterian, where he developed a minimally invasive mitral valve repair device, earning the first of four patents with the university (two of them have been commercialized). Spending hours with people near death from heart failure made him want to understand "not just how to keep them alive, but what kept them going," he says. "We were so used to treating the disease that we had forgotten to treat the patient." He founded and directed the hospital's new Cardiac Complementary Care unit and began using *reiki* touch therapy, massage and hypnosis—right in the operating room.

Oz's unorthodox methods prompted criticism from other doctors but earned him his first taste of fame. In 1995, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a lengthy profile on him, and soon after that he got a deal to write his first book, *Healing From the Heart*. It was a commercial flop, but invitations to appear on TV followed.

Back in 1991, Oz's Harvard roommate Billy Campbell had given him a script to read. Campbell had followed the surgeon around the emergency room and written up his experiences for a potential TV show. Oz says it eventually became *ER*. Oz had no involvement in that program, but in 2002 Campbell became president of the Discovery Channel, and he offered Oz a project of his own.

Hollywood Calls

Oz had been wanting to do a show that would give viewers a firsthand look inside the medical world. *Second Opinion*, which debuted in 2003, took viewers through the first two years of medical school in 13 episodes. In it, Oz displayed his penchant for piquing audience interest by using unfiltered, discomfiting images to demystify the human body.

Seeking attention for the show, he called on Oprah's best friend, Gayle King, whom he had gotten to know after writing his first book. Oprah agreed to appear in the first episode, and they immediately clicked. "What Oprah taught me more than anything else is that, as a physician, I shouldn't get tied down to the content," he says. "I should get tied down to the emotions underlying the motivation. That's where the battle has to be waged." Soon after, he started appearing regularly on *Oprah*.

A year later, Oz performed an emergency bypass on the wife of longtime friend Craig Wynett, the head of innovation at Procter & Gamble. Wynett thanked him with an introduction to Michael Roizen, then the head of anesthesia at the University of Chicago. Like most doctors, Roizen had spent years trying to get patients to stop smoking, take their medications and eat well. With one converted patient he had started a company, called RealAge, in 1995. RealAge provided a service, developed through the study of thousands of medical journal articles, that calculated a person's "real age" in health terms based on answers to lifestyle questions. Roizen knew he could be reaching far more people with it.

He had the data; Oz brought the ability to make the information compelling. They made a handshake deal and in 2004 released their first book, you: *The Owner's Manual*. They used a Web site to communicate with readers and sent out ad-sponsored e-mails containing helpful tips based on each user's health profile. The company says 20 million people have now taken its test, and a third of them "do things differently" as a result.

The three *YOU* books (more are on the way) have sold a combined 4.1 million copies. Last fall, Hearst bought RealAge for some \$50 million; Roizen and Oz will continue to contribute data for it.

Learning at Oprah's knee, Oz has become savvy about creating effective segments on her show. "It's not just about understanding the words, but it has to resonate," he says, "so that people sit back at home and say, 'That's right, I've got to do that.' She taught me a lot about that."

Three days after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Oprah sent Oz and a camera crew to Louisiana to help survivors. He paddled around in the fetid water in a trash can, helping victims get medical care, and he was featured in a two-part report along with Jamie Foxx, Bon Jovi and John Travolta, with Oprah hosting.

If you want Oz to do your bypass, make an appointment now. As his star rises and Harpo takes up more of his time, he has been gradually cutting back on his surgeries (he performed 250 last year). "I would argue that we are the best-educated society ever, in the history of mankind, about our health," he says. "But we're not motivated to change. Because to change you need a visceral understanding of why you should change. It's not about saying how smoking can kill you. It's about saying, 'I love you, so I'd like you to stop. You should care about yourself, too.'"