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Famous physicians

By Marni Jameson, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Here's a sampling of top celebrity doctors — whether authors, journalists, TV show hosts or all of the above — who are influencing what we eat, how we live and whom we love.

DR. MEHMET OZ

Claim to fame: Oz's good looks, plain talk and seemingly simple paths to self-improvement won over audiences on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," where he first appeared in 2004. He continues to make appearances on that show and other TV programs, and last fall he launched "The Dr. Oz Show."

A practicing cardiac surgeon, he writes a weekly syndicated health advice column with his friend Dr. Michael Roizen plus frequent articles for Esquire, Newsweek and O Magazine. Named one of Time's most influential people in 2008, he churns out a steady stream of bestselling books. He also directs the Cardiovascular Institute and Complimentary Medicine Program at New York Presbyterian Hospital.

As an advisor and spokesman for RealAge.com, Oz has been criticized for soliciting visitors to the site to fill out detailed health questionnaires to discover their "real age," then turning that information over to pharmaceutical companies, which then target-market drugs to these individuals. Others say he prefers sensationalism to science and that his claims for achieving extreme longevity are unproved and overblown.

Credentials: The cardiothoracic surgeon and professor of surgery at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons received his bachelor's degree from Harvard University in 1982 and a joint medical degree and MBA from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and Wharton Business School in 1986. He is board certified in both general and cardiothoracic surgery. He's written or co-written with Roizen (see below) several bestselling books.

Quote: "I'm all about fixing things. You have a problem. I want to fix the problem."

DR. MICHAEL ROIZEN

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Claim to fame: Bestselling author, TV regular, and close friend and colleague of Mehmet Oz, Roizen practices anesthesiology and internal medicine at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. There he also runs a celebrated wellness center, where he helps patients kick unhealthy habits.

His RealAge book series includes "RealAge: Are You as Young as You Can Be?" which was a No. 1 seller in five countries. He has also co-authored several bestselling books with Oz, including the "You" series: "You: The Owner's Manual," "You: On a Diet," "You: Staying Young." A frequent TV guest, he has delivered his prescriptions for wellness, youth, weight loss and longevity many times on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," "Today," "20/20," CNN, CBS, "The View" and "Good Morning America." He also co-writes a syndicated newspaper health column.

While he doesn't have the same telegenic appeal as Oz, his attractive promises attract audiences.

Some of his claims have been called, at a minimum, overblown. Among them: that people can live to age 160 with the right combination of diet and exercise, that people who drop bad habits now will be as healthy within three years as if they'd never had the habits and that we choose whether specific genes are activated.

Credentials: Chief wellness officer at the Cleveland Clinic, Roizen is also co-founder of RealAge.com, and chairman of the company's scientific advisory board. He earned his bachelor's degree from Williams College in 1967, with a double major in chemistry and economics, and his medical degree from UC San Francisco School of Medicine. He is board certified in both internal medicine and anesthesiology and is past chairman of the Food and Drug Administration's advisory committee.

Quote: "You get a do over."

DR. NANCY SNYDERMAN

Claim to fame: The NBC News chief medical editor reports for "Today," MSNBC, "NBC Nightly News" and "Dateline." Last year she started her own MSNBC show, "Dr. Nancy," which ended in December after six months. Snyderman, a cancer surgeon, is known to audiences for unpacking complex medical findings and making them understandable. Viewers like her smart-girl-next-door demeanor and the way she sifts through findings to help people decide whether to take hormones, drink red wine or have a mammogram, for example.

She is the author of several books, including "Diet Myths That Keep Us Fat," "Medical Myths That Can Kill You" and "Dr. Nancy Snyderman's Guide to Good Health for Women Over Forty," and she also writes a monthly column for Good Housekeeping.

Offended viewers as well as some members of the medical community say she lost her objectivity in her overzealous support of vaccines.

Credentials: Before joining NBC in 2006, Snyderman worked for ABC, where she contributed to "20/20," "Primetime," and "Good Morning America." She received her bachelor's degree in microbiology from Indiana University and her medical degree from the University of Nebraska in 1977. She's a surgeon on staff at the

University of Pennsylvania who is board certified in otolaryngology and who specializes in head and neck surgery.

Quote: "There's no conspiracy here, folks, just get your damn vaccine!"

DR. SANJAY GUPTA

Claim to fame: CNN's chief medical correspondent, Gupta walks the line between physician and reporter. The handsome neurosurgeon began his media career in 2003 when he went to Iraq to cover medical stories. In 2006, CBS tapped him to report for "CBS Evening News With Katie Couric" and "60 Minutes." He later went to CNN.

Today he writes a regular column for Time, appears on his own half-hour medical show and appears frequently on "Larry King Live" and "Anderson Cooper 360." His recognition factor helped put him on President Obama's shortlist for surgeon general, though Gupta took himself out of the running, citing family and career commitments. He's written bestsellers "Chasing Life" and "Cheating Death."

Generally respected for his medical news reports, he was criticized for his coverage in Haiti, where he treated a 15-day-old baby on camera whose "head injury" really only required simple first aid. Others have criticized his endorsement of Merck's cervical cancer vaccine Gardasil because of financial ties between CNN and Merck.

Credentials: A practicing neurosurgeon at Emory University Medical Center and Grady Memorial Hospital, both in Atlanta, he is also an assistant professor of neurosurgery at Emory University School of Medicine. Gupta received both his bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences and his medical degree from the University of Michigan, completing the latter in 1993.

Quote: "Eating, not smoking, is becoming the leading cause of preventable death."

DR. ATUL GAWANDE

Claim to fame: An accomplished writer and surgeon, Gawande may be the only person who has ever held simultaneous staff positions at a top hospital and at the New Yorker. His pieces on life as a surgical resident, which he published in a friend's online magazine, caught the eye of a New Yorker editor in the mid-1990s. He joined the New Yorker staff in 1998. His thoughtful, self-deprecating pieces cover a broad range of topics, such as physician behavior, gaps in the healthcare system, reform and related politics. He is also the author of three bestselling books, "Complications," "Better" and, most recently, "The Checklist Manifesto."

Most media experts say he's in a league of his own, and has earned the respect, if not the fame, the others wish they had.

Credentials: A general and endocrine surgeon, Dr. Gawande is on staff at Brigham and Women's Hospital and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute. He also serves as associate director of the school's Center for Surgery and Public Health, associate professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and associate professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School. He received his bachelor's degree from Stanford University; his master's degree in

politics, philosophy and economics from Oxford University; his medical degree from Harvard Medical School, in 1995; and his master's degree in public health from Harvard School of Public Health.

Quote: "Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try."

PHIL MCGRAW

Claim to fame: Another of Oprah Winfrey's anointed, McGraw, who hails from Texas, counseled Winfrey while she was the defendant in a Texas lawsuit brought by the cattle industry for a flip remark she made about beef. Impressed with his direct, no-nonsense style, she invited the psychologist to appear on her show in 1998. He soon became a regular, passing out hard-hitting relationship advice to an audience who couldn't get enough of his tough-love recipes.

In 2002, he began hosting his own TV talk show, "Dr. Phil," produced by Winfrey's production company. There he dispatches philosophical sound bites, such as, "You're only lonely if you're not there for you," and "The most you get is what you ask for." His bestselling books include "Life Strategies" and "Family First."

When he began marketing a line of weight loss products, critics claimed that he lacked the medical credential to recommend the products. After an investigation from the Federal Trade Commission, he pulled his weight loss products off the market in 2004 and later settled a class-action lawsuit brought against him for the claims. Some in the field of psychotherapy think his one-size-fits-all advice is too simplistic and is potentially harmful, particularly when audiences extrapolate advice to their own life.

Credentials: McGraw earned his bachelor's degree in psychology from Midwestern State University in 1975 and both his master's degree in experimental psychology and his doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of North Texas, completing the latter in 1979. He let his license to practice psychology expire in 2006 when he publicly retired from practice. The California Board of Psychology determined that he did not need a license to do the kind of work he does on his show because it's "entertainment."

Quote: "How's that working for you?"

DR. ANDREW WEIL

Claim to fame: An alternative doctor for those disillusioned by mainstream medicine, Weil is widely known for promoting integrative medicine, mind-body connections and herbal remedies. Founder of Weil Lifestyle, a company that sells his philosophy and products, Weil also serves as medical director of DrWeil.com, a website that reportedly gets 2 million hits a month and that features his daily blog.

The balding, bearded, New Age guru has written 10 books, including several national bestsellers: "8 Weeks to Optimum Health," "Eating Well for Optimum Health," "Healthy Aging" and, most recently, "Why Health Matters." Besides running an integrative medicine program in Tucson, which trains practitioners, Weil writes a monthly column for Prevention magazine and appears frequently on "Larry King Live" and "The Oprah Winfrey Show," where he touts his readily digestible beliefs that alternative medicine, good nutrition, exercise and stress reduction

are the keys to a better, longer life. In 2005, he made Time's list of most influential people.

Chastised for his advocacy of certain drugs, Weil devoted much of his early work and writings to psychoactive drugs. In the '70s and '80s, he contributed to High Times, where he wrote about altered states of consciousness. Some criticize him for promoting unproved ideas while rejecting evidence-based medicine. Although he promotes the concept of accepting the aging process with grace, he developed an age-defying line of skin care products.

Credentials: Weil, founder and director of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine, received both his bachelor's degree in biology (botany) and his medical degree from Harvard University.

Quote: "I think I've tried every drug."

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