This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival, sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its seventh year this free event, held on the National Mall, Saturday September 29th will spark reader's passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even those not attending in person can access the event online. Pre-recorded interviews, like the one you're listening to right now, with well-known authors will be available through the Book Festival website in podcast format. You can visit that at www.loc.gov/bookfest. I now have the honor of talking with Dr. Sanjay Gupta, the Associate Chief of Neurosurgery at Brady Memorial Hospital and Assistant Professor at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta. However, you may be more familiar with Dr. Gupta through his Emmy award winning work as Chief Medical Correspondent for CNN. Dr. Gupta travels the globe covering important health news, he hosts the program House Call with Dr. Sanjay Gupta and he regularly contributes to American Morning. In addition to his Time Magazine column, Dr. Gupta recently published his first book, Chasing Life New Discoveries in the Search for Immortality to Help You Age Less Today. In it he shares practical steps we can take right now to improve our health and longevity and he explores new medical discoveries that may help us age better and live longer. Welcome Dr. Gupta and thank you for taking time to talk with us.

Thanks so much. It's a real honor to be here.

Before we get into your book and some of the messages of your book I wanted to ask you about, a little bit about your career trajectory actually. Going from medicine to journalism might seem to most people a bit of a leap. What motivated you to expand into the field of reporting?

Well it's funny you know I always tell people that I sort of went from the microscope to the telescope. I, you know, literally as a neurosurgeon were operating, so a lot of time operating under the microscope, and as a journalist, you know, get to travel the whole world, see the world through a telescope. You know it's funny, I don't see it as disparate as a lot of people do see it. I think of being a doctor as a chance to educate, inform and help patients and I think as a journalist, especially a health journalist, a lot of what I end up doing is bringing it, a level of medical expertise, to millions of viewers, so it's a much broader brushstroke. And I've always been interested in sort of public health aspects of what it is that we do, so even simpler messages that could be given to lots of people was something that was always very interesting to me. I first got interested in it when I worked at the White House. I was a White House Fellow and I ended up working in the First Lady's office and I wrote a lot of speeches and crafted a lot of health care messages and I really got interested in the idea that you could, you know, through the words of the First Lady or the President, impact so many people, and so media in some ways was an actual extension of that.
Are there any people who you consider role models either in your work as a doctor and or a journalist? Who would those be if there are any?

Well you know there's certainly people who have really nurtured my career and you know my Chairman of Neurosurgery, for example, a man by the name of Buzz Hoff; a great name for a neurosurgeon. He was one of those people who not only taught me how to be a neurosurgeon, I think you know he taught us how to be some of the best neurosurgeons in the country, but he also was someone who really understood the value of citizen scholarships, understood the value of the idea that doctors used to be the ultimate renaissance citizens, concerned not only about health issues, which they're greatly concerned about, but also current events, politics, the arts, to just be well read, well informed people, because there's a real value in citizen scholarships, so he's somebody who I really think of as a mentor. You probably had never heard of him but the other people that I really look to are my own parents. Mainly I'm the child of two immigrants who were brought up under circumstances where they were often told that they couldn't do things that they wanted to do. They couldn't leave their small villages halfway around the world and come to the United States and pursue their dreams and they did it anyways. They sort of flew in the face of a lot of their conventional wisdom and accomplished something and I think that that always teaches me that you know what; you can push yourself even harder. You can be both a neurosurgeon and a journalist if you really want to do it. Even though no one's ever done it before, do it, and so those are some of the people who've really influenced me.

Now speaking of inspiration we'd like to think that the National Book Festival inspires people, getting them sort of in a nexus with authors that they're fans of. Why do you think it's important to participate in the book festival?

I think there's a real opportunity here to learn about things that maybe you don't have a chance to think about on a daily basis, so I love going to festivals much in the same way that I allow myself to go to bookstores and libraries and stuff just to sort be surprised. Look at both genres and specific books that I hadn't thought of before, and you know you find inspiration in places that maybe you didn't expect. So I think that going to the festival is important but coming to the festival with a really open mind, coming to the festival with a real sort of thirst, a real curiosity, makes it an extremely worthwhile thing and you used the right word I think, it is inspiring. Whether or not it makes you want to go out and write your own book or whether it makes you want to impact your world in some way or whether it just enlightens you in some way. Whatever it might be there's also always virtue in participating in this.

What can your readers and viewers expect to hear from you at the book festival?

I think that when I've participated in festivals before a lot of the readers are sort of, obviously you can read the book and I'm going to talk a little bit about the book, but I think they're very interested in the process too, the sort of nuts and bolts. First of all why, why write
a book like this? Second of all how do you go about doing it and how do you organize your thoughts? Is non-fiction harder to write than fiction? How do you source things? How do you organize it? I'll talk a lot about that. My book and my background is obviously health and this book sort of came about as a real curiosity about this idea of immortality and how we get there. Not necessarily living forever but living longer and more functional that ever before and what is it about personal responsibility in terms of our own health that makes it so important. We live in an age now where our health barometers and parameters are changing so rapidly how do we control a lot of these things on our own and I think that's a lot of what I'm going to talk about.

>> Let's talk a little bit more about the book. Chasing Life New Discoveries in the Search for Immortality to Help You Age Less Today. You've used the term health span. What does that mean? What do you refer to as that?

>> Well what I'm talking about is what I think is an antiquated notion that we sort of measure age in years. Most doctors don't actually measure age in years. Sure know how old somebody is, what's more important to us is what their physiological age is. I know 60 year olds who have the physiological age of a 40 year old and a vice versa. The question is what is your health span going to be? How long are you going to live in a healthy sort of way? I tell a lot of my patients and a lot of my viewers that we would prefer probably to live our lives like an incandescent light bulb; burn completely brightly our entire lives and then suddenly go out, no flickering at the end. Lots of healthy life and then suddenly done. Instead we expect, fully expect, that we're going to live part of our lives in nursing homes and in hospitals, less functional than we would like of both mind and body. How do we not let that happen to us? What we already know we can prevent that from happening. Let's get there as a society.

>> What are some of the most important things that we can do to improve our health spans?

>> Well you know obviously I wrote an entire book about it so there's tons of things that you can do, but I think a lot of it does have to do with, you know, as much as we talk about the [inaudible] of science and stem cells and nanotechnology and what the pharmaceutical industry has to offer, I think that has to be part of the discussion. There are a lot of things we can do as individuals from, you know, really understanding the physiology of exercise, for example. I'll give you a couple of examples. We became a very aerobic centered society, which I think is very important, and unfortunately we've gotten away a lot, at least a lot of people as they get older they get away from resistance training. Through some very careful analysis can explain how resistance training can not only make you live longer but improve the function of your life. Doing some upper body training for a few minutes a day can ward off osteoporosis, can make you stand up straighter both men and women, can ward of pneumonia, which is a big killer later in life, and it can also increase your muscle mass to the point where you rev up what's called your basal metabolic rate so you burn more calories at rest allowing you to sort of maintain weight, which is obviously a huge consideration with
regards to chronic disease as well. When it comes to diet I don't advocate taking supplements for the most part. I'm very clear in the book about a couple things that I do take, which are baby aspirin and fish oil, but other than that I don't advocate taking supplements. Not because the idea of taking antioxidants and things like that are bad for you, they're not, but the idea that you can actually take the good stuff if you will out of pills, out of food and put it into pill form, just doesn't seem to translate. You've got to eat right because you're not going to get all these micro nutrients and stuff otherwise. So a simple rule of thumb, try and eat seven different colored foods a day. If you do that you're probably going to be getting all the good stuff, quote unquote, that you need. One of the most important things I think and I think one of the least intuitive, is something wonderful that I learned from the Japanese and it's called [inaudible], which somewhat translated means sense of purpose. One of the things I think we lack often and unfortunately gets worse as we get older is a real sense of purpose about our lives. Why do we live? Why do we get up every morning and do what we do? What drives us? What inspires us? And what would our life be like if we didn't have those inspirations? In the United States and a lot of western society as you get older you lose your [inaudible]. In Japan that doesn't happen. An older person is revered, respected and welcomed in the younger societies and they really believe it's part of the reason that Japan has one of the longest life spans and health spans of anywhere on the planet.

You mentioned earlier a little bit about exercising. Your book has some really amazing anecdotes actually including one about a man who took up sprinting into his 80's. Does this really tell us that it really is never too old or too late to become physically active?

I think it does. James Hammond and I love using the example of James Hammond because I think just everybody, sort of everybody can relate to him in some way. He never exercised a day in his life. As a business man he traveled around and he looked like a business man who never exercised, and then suddenly he decided to take it up in a very serious way. And we were talking about the fact that when he was 60 he probably had the biological and physiological age of someone who was 80, and by the time he was 80 he may have actually had the physiological age of someone who was 50 just because he took up intense exercise. He found something, he found a goal and he pushed himself harder and harder and harder every single day, and it is never too late. And you won't get a chance to meet James Hammond but I wrote about him in this book. His entire life has been transformed by sort of incorporating this one intense exercise into his life. He has purpose, he has health, he's happier, everything about his life is healthier than it was before and it just goes to show you, as you said Matt, it's never too late to start.

If someone's just starting an exercise program, what do you think they should keep in mind? What are some of the things maybe that really can motive someone to stay physically active for their lifetime?

There's a couple things that I find that work really well. One is to set some real goals. Don't kill yourself. You're not going to erase years and years of non-exercise in a few days, a few weeks, a few months. Be
realistic in terms of what you can do but then do that, you set the goals yourself, but also try and surprise your body every day. Some people will say well I'm just going to run two miles every day and after a while it's just drudgery, it's a task more than anything else and no one really particularly enjoys that, so surprise yourself with different sorts of exercise. Add some of the resistance training, jump rope, skip, do something that's different on any given day, but I think the most important thing and I think this is the thing where a lot of people let it slip, is that you've got to recognize and even though you feel well now and that you're healthy now that unless you sort of maintain something a lot of that can slip away on you. So as important as it is for you to meet with your editor, as important as it is to meet with your boss or supervisor, anybody, you've got to get some exercise in just about every day, at least five days a week. Don't let exercise be the first thing to fall off the map. It happens to too many people all over the world, don't be one of those people.

>> Physical health obviously very important but a lot of patients and doctors alike really disregard how our emotional well-being can also affect our physical state. Talk a little bit about the connection between the two.

>> Well you know if your emotional well-being overall is not something that you focus on or practice, it's going to be very hard for anything else to sort of fall into place. You know people will say well I'm sort of in a funk or my mind just wasn't into it and therefore I, you know, couldn't exercise the way I wanted to or I couldn't take care of myself. You know forget exercise, sometimes if you're emotionally not present or having trouble you don't even get preventive medicine, you don't go see the doctor, you don't eat right, you don't do anything that's really meant to take care of yourself, so there's a huge connection and that's a mental one for the most part, lack of emotional well-being often leads to a lack of physical well-being. You know I'm a neurosurgeon. I'm someone who's been schooled in the sciences for my entire life. I like the scientific method. I like proof. I like data, but there's something that I learned in this process of writing this book that sort of surprised me and a lot of them had to do with emotional well-being. The idea of meditation every day for even a few minutes, and a couple of people I interviewed for book, Deepak Chopra was one of them and he gave me the great quote. He says if you can't find 15 minutes to meditate every day that probably means you need a [inaudible]. And it's a good point that he makes and the point is that you know we all need to be able to find time to take care of our spirit and our emotional well-being, and again this is a neurosurgeon saying this. I like to meditate every day. I do it and I spend a few minutes doing it. There are different times throughout the day where I'll just basically really visualize my breaths going in through my senses, down around my lungs and out my mouth and I'll whisper a word that I like as I'm exhaling and the word for me is gentle. So I'll do this 10, 15, 20 times and it's amazing what happens. First of all I feel better but now we know scientifically your heart rate is [inaudible] your blood pressure comes down, you have less cortisol, which is a stress hormone being released, there's a real connection between emotional well-being and physical well-being.
Well as a doctor and a journalist alike you are probably better positioned than almost anybody to know about what's coming up? What's the latest information in terms of medicine and science? What are some of the discoveries and research maybe on the horizon that you think are going to prolong and improve our lives?

Well there's a lot of excitement in the world of, in the future of medicine. I'm particularly interested in, for example, some of the neurodegenerative problems that plague us now as a society; Alzheimer's for example is something that I think about a lot. I worry about some of my relatives who may develop, I worry about myself, and I do think in our lifetime we're going to see something similar to an Alzheimer's vaccine, something that you can take to prevent Alzheimer's from developing. We're not there yet but I think it's something that we might actually see one day. I also think that, you know, with regard to stem cells, something I write about extensively in the book, that there is so much fertile ground here with regard to trying to make spinal cords that are injured, less injured. Trying to treat nerve degenerative problems such as Parkinson's disease. The very idea that the stem cells may have a rejuvenate effect that not only could they slow down aging, some people as these scientists in Russia believe, they think it can actually reverse aging; that they can make us younger in some way, which is pretty fascinating. There's an idea of nanotechnology, which I write about in the book as well, this idea that you could actually have these super cells that circulate through your body that every time they see something abnormal, too much cholesterol here, tumor cell here that might divide, eliminate those things so that we can live more functional lives. Matt I use the term live more functional lives constantly as opposed to saying immortality because living a more functional life is a sort of practical immortality. If we live more functional lives our entire lifespan, we've actually lived a longer life.

If I could just turn to current events for a moment, you received a lot of attention lately whether it was welcome or not, when Michael Moore criticized you about your coverage of his recent documentary, Sicko. What is your take on that and how valid do you think is his film's comparison of the American health care system to other countries?

Well let me say first of all I think that we live in a society where people like to say you're either red or blue, you're either black or white, you're either for it or against it, and I think as a society, unfortunately, we take too many shortcuts. Maybe it's just laziness or lack of time to really understand people's positions on things. I've known Michael for a long time. I think that the idea that our health care system is broken, the idea that the very measure of our society isn't how we take care of people who can't take care of themselves and we don't do a very good job of it, is something that I think we share in terms of our belief in that and that's why I work at the White House. I work in a lot of these issues that Michael put in his movie. I've been working on these issues for over a decade. I think the issue that I had and I think some, you know, obviously there's a lot of people who think about this a lot, is that if you're going to try and implement some sort of national health care system, to simply look at the positive attributes of other countries without completely presenting all the facts and some of the shortcomings
I think it's detrimental. I think it blackens the eyes of people who are actually trying to get something done about health care. To sort of skim over or completely neglect or to misconstrue, for example, waiting times or quality of health care in other countries, to somehow say that the United States system would be better serve by a system like Cuba without taking a close look at the system, Michael knows that the [inaudible] Cuba for example is one of literally 10,000 hospitals that is like that. And he knew at the time, he knows it now and he still sort of presents that as sort of the way that all of Cuba is, and I think that luckily most people sort of understand that that's not the case but they also understand that what Michael did in that movie is an important message and that is that our health care system really does need some overhauling. I would not have had an issue at all with this movie if Michael, you know, presented it as a film, a movie like any other but he calls it a documentary. I think that documentarians have an obligation to present everything that they know about an issue, not to simply pick numbers from various years and various studies to somehow support to negate an argument and to make sure that they're really presenting all sides of what might or might not be present. I don't know, you know, like I said I was surprised it got so much attention. My only regret is that we spent more time talking about personalities of Michael Moore and myself than we did about what's a really important issue, which is health care in this country.

I'm sure a lot of it is a factor of the internet culture we live in with YouTube and blogs kind of keeping things alive far longer than maybe they would have otherwise.

Yes and there's a real role for that. The blogosphere and the internet have lent a voice to people who did not have voices before and I think it's so critically important. You know, I think, you know there's a real, health care is really important to people and it should be. I think it always has been but for some reason, and I mentioned this when I talked to Michael, and I'm not sure why, people don't always vote their conscious when it comes to health care. When it comes to the big elections, the big opportunities to do something really big with health care, people seem to gloss over it at that time and I hope that this upcoming election and these upcoming discussions about it are different. I hope people really do think about it and understand where we need to go as a society with this.

Well that's probably a good note to end on but before I let you go I want to ask what is next for Dr. Sanjay Gupta?

Well I really enjoy where I am right now in life. I get to be a doctor. I get to take care of patients every day and I think it's one of the most fulfilling things that I can do. I also get to inform millions of people through my work on CNN and it's challenging work. One thing about my life is that it's not glamorous. I mean I wake up about 4:00, 4:45 in the morning every day and I'm off and not getting home until 8:00, 9:00 at night and that's what it takes to basically hold down a job as a doctor and as a journalist and Time Magazine writer, and I'm working on another book. I just signed a deal to follow up Chasing Life. It's a book that's tentatively called Cheating Death. There's a little bit of a
theme going here. We're sort of working at the other end of the life spectrum and looking at how people can really, near the end of their years, cheat death, you know, get the most out of those final years of life and then, and how doctors and the health care system can best enhance that for people.

>> Well the current book is Chasing Life New Discoveries in the Search for Immortality to Help You Age Less Today. Dr. Sanjay Gupta we very much appreciate your time today.

>> And again Matt thank you very much. I look forward to it.

>> Okay and we are excited to hear more from you and the National Book Festival. That will be Saturday September 29th on the National Mall from 10 am to 5 pm. The event is free and open to the public and if you want more details and a list of participating authors, you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress I'm Matt Raymond. Thank you very much for listening.

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