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The med in social media

Considerations on integrating social media into medical educations

Jimmy Yan (Meds 2015)

Faculty Reviewer: Dr. George Kim, MD (Department of Family Medicine)

Social media is a broad term describing a collection of online and mobile technologies that allow people to create interactive communication channels.¹ These mediums can be used to create, monitor, manipulate, and share a variety of content including text, audio, video, or digital images. Its use can be done actively in real-time or passively through different platforms such as individual blogs, websites, YouTube, podcasts, social networking sites, or even an online discussion forum.² The user base of these sites has formed an evolving digital community known as Web 2.0, or the Social Web, the internet's second version. The crux of Web 2.0 is interactivity, content is no longer simply 'pushed' to viewers, but a dynamic exchange of 'push, pull, and create' by all users.³ Social media serves as the defining element of Web 2.0.

Regardless of how it's defined, social media has become a prominent discussion point in the medical profession. Survey findings report that over half of Canadian physicians use at least one form of social media, and over 80% of Canadian physicians expressed concerns that social media "poses professional and legal risks to physicians."⁴ Indeed, in a field where confidentiality and trust are paramount, it is easy to see why physicians are hesitant to embrace social media and its insouciance towards personal privacy in their professional lives. Medical students are also wary about their actions on social media: opting to hide themselves away, limiting their privacy settings or even deleting their accounts when CaRMS selection rolls around.

Yet, consider the following bits of information. The current global active user base for Facebook is over 1.1 billion users;⁵ the registered user base of Twitter is over 500 million, with over 340 million tweets generated daily.⁶ In comparison to the 38 and 13 years it took the radio and TV, respectively, to be adopted by 50 million users, the times that Facebook (1 year) and Twitter (9 months) reported are eye-opening.⁷ Furthermore, these users are everyday individuals, and they are everyday patients. To disregard social media would be to overlook significant aspects of how patients are getting and communicating information.

Additionally, due to the pervasiveness of Web 2.0 and its ability for information to be created and stored by any user, simply detaching oneself from social platforms or changing privacy settings does not guarantee one's personal activities and online presence will remain anonymous or publicly un-cited. Photos or videos of medical students or physicians can still be posted by peers or colleagues identifying them. Comments, tweets, and mentions that include one's name can also be made by any friend, co-worker, patient, or even strangers, and once those words are put online, there will always be a way for it to be found.² Patients googling a physician, hospital, or medical school can, and will find, information

made by other people. If one rejects participation entirely in these social platforms, the ability to mold the online content around them is lost. Medical professionals need not become envoys in all aspects of social media, but at the very least become knowledgeable of their own digital footprints.

The debate on whether physicians should be engaged on social media professionally will continue on, and illustrates why this topic needs to be brought into current medical education. Consider the following summary of the possible benefits and uses for social media in medical care:

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

1. Opening Physician-Patient communication channels

Social media is the gateway for online communication. The interactive exchange along these platforms can strengthen the physician patient relationship by giving a new means for patients to reach medical professionals. It places the patient truly at the centre of care as they can communicate their research and ask questions on their own schedule, even from the comfort of their own homes. Used strategically, social media allows for greater patient participation and autonomy in their health care.

2. Improved access to knowledge and resources

One great feature of social media is its ease of customization. Professionally designed Facebook pages, YouTube channels, blogs, Twitter accounts, and web forums allow users to subscribe to information on their own topics of interest. These include some of the most established medical organizations, including the New England Journal of Medicine (@NEJM), and the Lancet (@TheLancet). These platforms can all be great tools for self-directed adult learners, giving users the freedom to learn within their own schedules and often a variety of modules to accommodate individual learning styles.⁸

3. Public Campaigns

Social media can bring public awareness of healthcare initiatives. In spring 2012, Facebook launched a feature that allowed US and UK users to share their organ donor status with their network, the addition of this tool prompted a huge, albeit transient spike in local organ donation registry sign-ups.^{9,10} This effect was also seen in Canada. For example, Ontario's Trillium Gift of Life registry also reported an increased number of individuals signing up following the move by Facebook.¹¹ There could be a potential future avenue for social media in garnering support to organ donations, blood drives, or other public health campaigns.

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4. Physician to physician networking

Indubitably social networking can be a great asset for physicians to reach each other. Social media platforms allow easy sharing of links, articles, research interests, and can generate discussion among those with common interests.^{1,2} For example, The Skeptics Guide to Emergency Medicine (theSGEM.com) is a physician created and operated website that utilizes Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and weekly podcasts to share Emergency Medicine clinical scenarios. Since its inception in 2012, it has already been linked with other podcast groups with similar goals, and is included in a global community of physicians committed to providing free open-Cited resources for medical education.^{12,13,14} Another avenue that social media has become useful for physician networking is within conferences. Many medical conferences have adopted official Twitter hashtags – labels which allow users to find content related to that tag easily. Through Twitter and these hashtags, physicians at conferences can find out, in real time, information from workshops they could not attend from those present, engage in side discussion about a talk with other listeners without interrupting the speaker, and make acquaintances with other physicians there. The ability to connect and communicate from any part of the world, as long as one knows which hashtag channel to follow, is a powerful advantage which allows physicians to form online global networks.

5. Monitoring of disease trends

With greater participation of patients in the access of health information, the data in what is being searched or asked about can become value to survey and monitor as well. The 21st century saw the beginnings of a new field of data analysis: infoveillance.¹⁵ This is the field where health informatics are used to track user queries and recognize patterns that are associated with specific disease parameters. Closely related to this is the new field of infodemiology: using information from an electronic medium, specifically the Internet, within a population to shape and inform public health and policy.¹⁵ One of the more well-known examples is Google Flu Trends, which keeps tracks of online search queries from a particular population region to provide real-time estimations of flu outbreaks within that area.¹⁶ Information sent over Twitter has also been tracked in order to see how it can be used to monitor disease.¹⁷ Other research has been conducted to see if social media can be used to predict the incidence of depression and other mental illness in a population.¹⁸

6. Positive professional image

There is a great deal of concern about the content of a physician's online life not only damaging their professional image but also compromising the reputation and general confidence in the medical profession.^{1,2} While these concerns are fundamentally reasonable, physicians and medical trainees can work proactively to create a positive online presence. This is achieved through purposeful and curated activity over social media. Adding a stronger physician presence can help provide patients with better access to doctors, more credible sources for information, and a stronger voice to balance the other sorts of opinionated claims online.^{2,3}

CONCLUSIONS

Social media has clear potential to greatly enhance the field of medicine. However, without early exposure and guidance on proper use, it will remain a hesitant and nebulous subject to approach. As current and future patients are becoming more adept at utilising social media, likewise medical education needs address this area and train students appropriately. It is time to be proactive in the handling of social media and train the next generation of physicians into the Net generation of physicians.

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