



Social Media, Physicians, and Points to Consider

The Internet is an increasingly vital marketing tool.

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Physicians all over the country raise their right hand and take an oath that tasks them with the commitment to being life-long learners. We strive to maintain this mindset as a benefit to our patients and the healthcare we have been charged to provide, forcing us to stay up-to-date with the latest medical advances, constantly evolving drug research, and the technology used within the healthcare system to provide services to our patients. One-third of active physicians in today's healthcare system are over 55 years old.¹ Those physicians entered the medical field before the Internet made its way into the healthcare field and altered the way in which physicians provide healthcare to their patients. The remaining two-thirds of active physicians have always provided healthcare in a world where the Internet, and, soon thereafter, social media, have always existed.

In response to the take-off of social media, modalities have been developed that use both the Internet and social media to fill in the gap created by the current physician shortage in the U.S. healthcare system. According to a physician workforce report, the United States is expected to face a shortage of physicians over the next 10 years.² As the baby boomer generation moves closer to

retirement, the number of practicing physicians is expected to decrease, while the number of elderly patients requiring complex medical care is expected to simultaneously increase, widening the gap in the current physician-to-patient ratio. To accommodate this discrepancy, new healthcare models have been developed that integrate the Internet and social media so physicians are better able to reach the vast number of patients they have under their care. More than four billion people worldwide use the

ability to schedule online video consultations with healthcare providers.

These tools have made it easier for patients to access healthcare and have begun to eliminate the need for them to schedule appointments for minor complaints such as a viral upper respiratory infection or seasonal allergies.

More recently, physicians have taken to social media platforms to reach a large number of patients in real-time. For example, many licensed physicians maintain Instagram accounts. Instagram has 400 million daily

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Internet each month, so integrating social media into the healthcare system is one way to attempt to offset the patient-physician imbalance.³

The surge in new communication tools that utilize the Internet and social media has changed the way in which physicians and patients interact.

Latest Advances

Online blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, video chat, instant messaging platforms, and online forums are among the latest advances that physicians are using to improve communication with their patients. PortalConnect was designed as an online platform that many physicians have integrated into their practices to provide their patients with access to online health records, lab results, medication refill requests, and, additionally, the

active users, and its use has achieved a broad reach as a medicine-based communication tool since it was introduced five years ago.⁴ Searching for hashtags such as "medical advice," "physician," or "medical" leads to a vast number of results that provide general medical-based education and advice, all at the general public's fingertips. It reaches patients in platforms that are comfortable to them.

One Instagram user and board-certified emergency medicine physician, Cassondra Majestic, MD, manages an Instagram account that is dedicated to providing an insider's look into the field of emergency medicine as well as educating the general public on illnesses such as hemoptysis and anaphylaxis. She educates her followers on the influenza vaccine,

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tuberculosis testing, and the benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. With more than 51,000 followers, she is able to reach a large number of people with just the click of a button.

Twitter and Facebook are used by the CDC as a means for disease surveillance, to locate and track suspected sources of illnesses such as measles, and as a way to disseminate public health information on a mass scale. Using its social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, the CDC is able to reach nearly two million people.⁵ Followers receive the latest news releases and public health information without having to intentionally seek it out. In addition, basic medicine-based education is available on the CDC's YouTube channel to those users who wish to seek it out.

Professionalism and Privacy

The power of integrating social media into our healthcare modality is indisputable, but with this new trend comes the need to maintain professionalism, ensure patient confidentiality, and protect the patient-physician relationship. Violations of privacy, dissemination of poor-quality information, damage to professional image, and blurring of the patient-physician boundary have all arisen as dangers of the social media-based healthcare trend.

To help address some of these issues, the American Medical Association released guidelines in 2010 addressing the ethical use of social media by physicians. These guidelines highlighted the need to ensure patient confidentiality, maintain appropriate patient-physician boundaries, and ensure that all shared information is both factual and honest.⁶ It noted that although the use of social media provides a tool for communication that is both quick and far reaching, it also allows users to harbor a sense of anonymity.

The enormous number of everyday social media and Internet users creates the potential for recorded exchanges to reach millions of people within minutes. Unprofessional exchanges, whether personal or professional, could hinder a patient's trust in his or

her providers and discredit the quality of the healthcare they receive.

Healthcare is based on the trust patients place in their providers and the understanding that shared information will be both truthful and accurate. Information shared by a physician online may be intended to be educational, but could be disseminated on a larger-than-anticipated scale.

There are no FDA guidelines regulating the promotion of medications within the social media world.

When this happens, this information has the potential to be taken out of context or applied as general medical advice to all patients, regardless of their individual state of health.

Balance and Credibility

For example, there are no FDA guidelines regulating the promotion of medications within the social media world. Recently, celebrity Kim Kardashian was approached by a particular pharmaceutical company and paid to use Twitter to promote its anti-nausea medication for use during pregnancy. She highlighted how effective the drug was, but omitted any disclosure of potential side effects.⁷ FDA regulations state that potential side effects must be included when discussing a particular drug's benefits so consumers receive balanced risk and benefit information.⁸ The unregulated information can reach a large number of patients, who then turn to their providers in search of the same result, without giving consideration to patient specificity.

Ensuring that information shared online is truthful and honest is of the utmost importance, but pointing patients to reliable online resources is of equal importance. Social media has a reputation for sharing information that often lacks credibility, is unreliable, and is of poor quality. Personal medical stories often are taken as solid medical knowledge, and a patient's interpretation of such information is limited. If online resources are to be used as an aid to assist patients in understanding their health, healthcare providers should guide patients to trustworthy and credible online resources.

The relationship between the physician and patient is built on trust. Patients trust that the quality of healthcare they are receiving is sound, that the services provided are specific to their individual needs, and that the information shared with them is truthful and honest. Although the ease of interacting with patients using the Internet is enticing, social media may

serve as a distraction to patients and harm the quality of their interactions with the physician.

Recent studies have shown that many patients send "friend requests" to physicians using Facebook.⁹ Although surveys show that most physicians do not reciprocate, allowing patients to peek into the personal lives of their physicians can result in blurring of professional boundaries.⁹ To counter this, standards for interactions with patients should be the same for all encounters, whether in person or online. Any online forms of communication between physicians and patients should enhance face-to-face interactions, not replace them. Providing general medical education online may be acceptable, but patient-specific healthcare advice should not be provided via social media.

Trust and Confidentiality

Regardless of their intended use, interactions on social media increase the risk of breaching patient confidentiality. State privacy laws or HIPAA regulations may be violated when a physician interacts with patients by posting information, comments, images, or videos online.¹⁰ Such actions can result in legal repercussions and damage the physician's career while also discrediting the profession as a whole. Unfortunately, it seems to be more difficult to protect patient privacy than expected. A recent study of 271 medical blogs written by physicians revealed that patient-specific information was included in 42% of those blogs.^{11,12} HIPAA privacy rules

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require that all patient-identifying information be removed from clinical vignettes before those are shared online.¹² Changing key patient identifiers (e.g., name, date of birth, insurance information) and removing any revealing information such as medical diagnoses and photos helps eliminate the potential for violating these privacy laws.

An important question in today's rapidly evolving healthcare system continues to be how to effectively integrate social media within the healthcare profession so the growing number of patients can be efficiently reached without sacrificing professionalism, patient trust, and confidentiality. As with providing healthcare to patients, the benefit-to-risk ratio must be applied when physicians consider when and how to interact on social media. With vigilance, physician activity on social media platforms can improve health outcomes, increase awareness of medical-related news, motivate patients, and inform communities of important health information.¹²

As the next, more social media-savvy, generation of physicians takes over, social media are bound to become further engrained into the way healthcare is provided. It would benefit hospitals, residency programs, and healthcare entities to establish guidelines for appropriate and professional use of social media outlets.¹³ Meeting

patients in their comfort zone improves the conversation and strengthens the patient-physician relationship—as long as providers set the tone with professionalism, appropriate boundaries, and respect for patient privacy. **PM**

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