

Web 2.0: Boon or Boondoggle for Health Care Professionals?

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Abstract

Since the emergence of social media in 2004, a growing percentage of patients use this technology for health related reasons. Social media has moved beyond being a tool for young individuals to share their private lives (pictures, messages) to fostering serious discussion on technology and business. Increasingly driven by regulatory pressures, the need “get it right the first time” and minimize costs remains a concern in the healthcare industry.

Social media is making interactions between end users and service providers possibly by providing relatively simple, easy to access (one can access social media even using a mobile phone) and unbiased platforms for sharing feedback. Little wonder then that many healthcare providers in the world are on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and blogs. However in this paper the researcher wants to investigate patients and health professional's motives and use of social media for health related reasons, and benefits, risk and best practices.

Introduction:

A **health professional, health practitioner or healthcare provider** is an individual who provides preventive, curative, promotional or rehabilitative health care services in a systematic way to people, families or communities.

Since the emergence of social media in 2004, a growing percentage of patients use this technology for health related reasons. Many social media (web 2.0) tools are available for health care professionals (HCPs), including social networking platforms, blogs, micro-blogs, wikis, and media-sharing sites. These tools can be used to improve or enhance professional networking and education. Organizational promotion, patient education, patient care, and public health programs. However, they also present potential risks to patients and HCPs regarding the distribution of poor

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quality information, damage to professional image, breaches of patient privacy, Many health care institutions and professional organizations have issued guidelines to prevent these risks.

What are social media (web 2.0)?

The definition of “social media” is vast and constantly evolving. The term generally refer to internet based tools that allow individuals and communities to gather and communicate, to share information, ideas, personal messages, images, and other content and in some cases, to collaborate with other users in real time.

Social networking (Facebook , MySpace, Google Plus, Twitter)

Professional networking (LinkedIn)

Media sharing (YouTube, Flickr)

Content production (blogs [tumblr, Blogger] and micro blogs (twitter))

Knowledge/information aggregation (Wikipedia)

Participation in social media by the general public has increased sharply over the past nine years, the proportion of adults using social media has increased from 8% to 72% since 2004. The use of social media is prevalent across all ages and professions and is pervasive around the world.

Participation in social media by health care professionals:

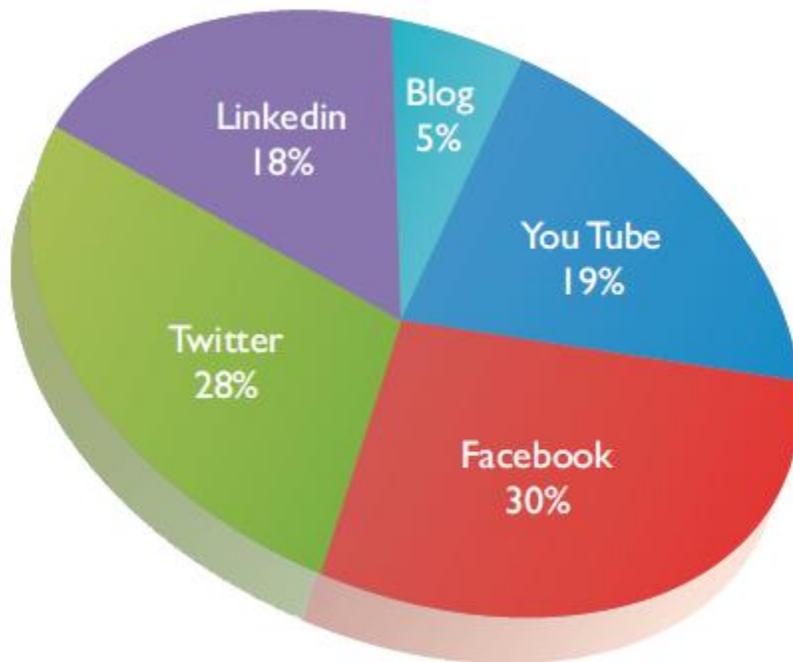
Social media provide HCPs with tools to share information, to debate health care policy and practice issues, to promote health behaviors, to engage with the public, and to educate and interact with patients, caregivers, students, and colleagues.

A survey of more than 4.000 physicians conducted by the social media site QuantiaMD found that more than 90% of physicians use some form of social media for personal activities, whereas only 67% use these sites for professional reasons. Nearly a third of physicians have reported participation in social networks. However, both personal and professional use of social media by physicians is increasing.

SOCIAL MEDIA SITES FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Social Networking Sites

As social networking has emerged, medically focused professional communities have been established. These networks are often private and protected from nonmembers, such as the lay public and even members of other health professions. For example **Sermo** is a “physician-only” social networking community



Patients health related social media use

Blogs

The “blog,” a term formed by truncating “Web log,” is the oldest and most established form of social media, which has been used in medicine since as early as 2004. Blogs can reach wide audiences, especially the opportunity to publish large amounts of information in a variety of media (text, video, and audio) in an open forum. Most blogging platforms allow readers to respond to published content by posting their own comments. This enables an ongoing dialogue between the blogger and his or her audience. Examples of widely used free “long-form” blogging platforms include tumblr.com, wordpress.org, and blogger.com.

Microblogs

Microblogs provide the most dynamic and concise form of information exchange via social media. This format allows users to post a large number of brief messages or updates over a short period.

Twitter is the most prominent that allows users publish messages (called “tweets”) that consist of a maximum of 280 characters. Tweets can be supplemented with hyperlinks to other online media, such as videos or websites. Tweets can also include “hashtags,” a form of information indexing that allows people to search for tweets that are related to a particular discussion or topic. Hashtags followed by HCPs include #HCSM (for Health Care Social Media), #MDChat, and #Health20.

Wikis

Wikis are public forum websites featuring text and multimedia content that can be edited by users. “Wiki” is a Hawaiian word meaning “quick,” which refers to the speed with which information on a wiki can be accessed, added, edited, or deleted. Surprisingly, Wikipedia is the most commonly used in the medical community for reference

A study found that 70% of 35 junior physicians used Wikipedia to find medical information during a week-long period, with 93% citing ease of use as their primary motivation. As the accuracy and completeness of Wikipedia are often debated, the drug information on that site was compared with a validated and trusted information source,

Media-Sharing Sites

Media-sharing sites, such as YouTube, offer a large selection of social media tools that are optimized for viewing, sharing, and embedding digital media content on the Web. They also provide features that are typically found on other types of social media sites, such as profiles, connections, comments, and private messaging. Most media-sharing sites are easy to use, provide free basic accounts, and are accessible from both desktop and mobile devices. In medicine, media-sharing sites can be important resources for education, community building, marketing, and branding. Among the most notable media-sharing sites for HCPs is The Doctors’ Channel (www.thedoctorschannel.com), which hosts videos featuring medical news, continuing medical education, and health care-related entertainment

USES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA IN HEALTH CARE

Professional Networking

The most popular social media sites for physicians are those where they can participate in online communities, listen to experts, and network and communicate with colleagues regarding patient issues. The use of social media by pharmacists also frequently focuses on communication with colleagues. Besides clinical topics, discussions on these sites address diverse subjects, such as ethics, politics, biostatistics, practice management, career strategies, and even dating in a medical environment. Thus, social media Provide a new communication channel for HCPs to network professionally to share and exchange medical information in ways and at a pace that was never before possible.

Professional Education

The communication capabilities provided by social media are also being used to improve clinical education. The high usage rate of social media by 18- to 29-year-olds has motivated the adaptation of clinical curricula to reflect the changing habits and culture of incoming students. Many studies have described the use of social media tools to enhance clinical students' understanding of communication, professionalism, and ethics. A 2011 survey also found that 38% of pharmacy faculty members use Facebook for teaching. Online social media platforms have also influenced the educational experience for nurses, with one survey reporting that 53% of nursing schools are now using these tools.

Organizational Promotion

Health care organizations, including hospitals, health systems, professional societies, pharmaceutical companies, patient advocacy groups, and pharmacy benefit companies, are using social media for many purposes. Uses include communicating with the community and patients; enhancing organizational visibility; marketing products and services; establishing a venue for acquiring news about activities, promotions, and fund-raising; providing a channel for patient resources and education; and providing customer service and support.

Patient Care

Although there has been disinclination among HCPs to use social media for direct patient care, this practice is slowly being accepted by clinicians and health care facilities. For example, Georgia Health Sciences University has provided patients with access to a platform called WebView, which allows the patients to reach their doctors to ask questions or to request prescription refills. Recent studies found approximately 60% of physicians are interacting with patients through social media for the purpose of providing patient education and health monitoring, and for encouraging behavioral changes and drug adherence,

Patient Education

Social media can also improve patients access to health care information and other educational resources. Some physicians believe that social media would be particularly beneficial for patients with chronic, rare, or fatal diseases; with questions about maternal or infant care; or with personal health-related goals, such as weight management. Patients are also using social media to connect with others affected by similar conditions. For example, the social networking site PatientsLikeMe (www.patientslikeme.com) provides a venue for patients to access information, suggestions, and support from other people who have the same disease or condition.

Public Health Programs

Social media have created wide global networks that can quickly spread information and mobilize large numbers of people to facilitate greater progress toward public health goals. Social media can

therefore be a powerful tool for public education and advocacy regarding public health issues. Some states public health departments are using Twitter and other social media for these purposes.

THE DANGERS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Poor Quality of Information

The main limitations of health information found on social media and other online sources is a lack of quality and reliability. Authors of medical information found on social media sites are often unknown or are identified by limited information. In addition, the medical information may be unreferenced, incomplete, or informal. The World Health Organization is leading a request to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers to establish a new domain suffix that would be used solely for validated health information. The issuance of this domain suffix would be strictly regulated, and the content of websites with these addresses would be monitored to assure compliance with strict quality criteria.

Damage to Professional Image

A major risk associated with the use of social media is the posting of unprofessional content that can reflect unfavorably on HCPs, students, and affiliated institutions. Social media convey information about a person's personality, values, and priorities, and the first impression generated by this content can be lasting. Perceptions may be based on any of the information featured in a social media profile, such as photos, nicknames, posts, and comments liked or shared, as well as the friends, causes, organizations, games, and media that a person follows. Behavior that could be construed as unprofessional includes violations of patient privacy; the use of profanity or discriminatory language; images of sexual suggestiveness or intoxication and negative comments about patients.

Breaches of Patient Privacy

Concerns regarding the use of social media by HCPs frequently center on the potential for negative repercussions resulting from the breach of patient confidentiality. Such infractions may expose HCPs and health care entities to liability under federal HDPSA (Health care Data Privacy and Security Act) and state privacy laws. An HCP may breach HDPSA state privacy laws in a number of ways when posting information, comments, photos, or videos concerning a patient to a social networking site. However, it is ultimately up to the individual HCP, the practice, or the organization to decide when they will seek patient consent before posting de-identified case details online

Violation of the Patient–HCP Boundary

HCPs who interact with their patients on social media may be violating the patient–HCP boundary even if patients initiate the online communication. A recent study found that patients often extend online “friend” requests to their physicians on Facebook. However, very few physicians reciprocate or respond, since it is generally thought to be ill-advised for an HCP to interact with a patient through a general social media forum such as Facebook. In addition, organizational policy statements often discourage personal online communication between HCPs and patients. For example, CaringBridge (www.caringbridge.org) is a nonprofit website that is designed to create a social media presence for patients on a protected, user-friendly venue. Patients can use their CaringBridge profile for the purpose of interactively communicating with concerned followers during a health event. Physicians may also violate a patient’s personal boundary through the inappropriate use of information found online or on social media. Therefore, an HCP should consider the source of this information and use clinical judgment to determine whether and how to reveal this discovery during patient management

Legal Issues

The widespread use of social media has introduced new legal complexities. A number of constitutional rights can be applied to the use of social media, such as freedom of speech, freedom from search and seizure, and the right to privacy; however, these rights can be successfully challenged. In 2009, a U.S. District Court upheld the expulsion of a nursing student for violating the school’s honor code by making obscene remarks about the race, sex, and religion of patients under her care. The court concluded that the school’s honor code and confidentiality agreement signed by each nursing student governed the standards of acceptable behavior, dismissing the student’s claim that her right to freedom of speech had been violated.

Social Media Guidelines for HCPs Issued by Professional Organizations

- Share only information from credible sources.
- Refute any inaccurate information you encounter.
- Remember that the content you author may be discoverable.
- Comply with federal and state privacy laws.
- Respect copyright laws.
- Know professional licensure requirements for your state.
- Do not contact patients with requests to join your network.
- Avoid providing specific medical advice to nonpatients.
- Avoid writing about specific patients.
- Make sure you are in compliance with state and federal privacy laws.
- Obtain patient consent when required.
- Protect patient information through “de-identification.”
- Use a respectful tone when discussing patients.
- Use the most secure privacy settings available.
- Keep personal and professional profiles separate.

CONCLUSION

When used wisely and prudently, social media sites and platforms offer the potential to promote individual and public health, as well as professional development and advancement. However, when used carelessly, the dangers these technologies pose to HCPs are formidable. Guidelines issued by health care organizations and professional societies provide sound and useful principles that HCPs should follow to avoid pitfalls.

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