

Social media in medical practice: A boon or bane!!!

Ashish Gulia

Social media comprise a number of online and mobile resources that provide a platform for sharing, and discussion of individualized ideas/thoughts and content in public domain. Social media are commonly defined by specific applications and/or tools, most of which are widely accessible and free to use. These applications may be categorized by purpose, including such functions as professional networking social networking (Facebook, Google), media sharing (Instagram, YouTube), content production (blogs, Twitter), and knowledge/information aggregation.^[1]

For medical professionals, social media may be used for professional networking, interfacing with colleagues and patients, and clinical trials activities. Social media can provide the platforms to relay new information and encourage the exchange of ideas. However, these opportunities come along with their share of shortcomings too.

Physician use of social media may fall into one of three categories: Professional education/continuous professional development, public health messaging or education, and direct engagement with specific patients for purposes of clinical care. Although each of these categories provides for unique opportunities in practice development, it comes with a fair share of risks.

Physicians are also using social media to educate the common mass. Tweets, blogs, or other information on social media provide a more targeted form of social media education. In the interactive forums, the public has the opportunity to actively participate in these discussions. This represents a tremendous opportunity for physicians to disseminate legitimate, evidence-based information and counter the proliferation of inaccurate and/or anecdotal material available online. However, potential conflicts of interests have to take care of also particularly if mentioning specific treatments. Principles of patient privacy and compliance with regulatory requirements sometimes make us stay put from using social media for direct patient care.^[2]

After a disease diagnosis, a significant proportion of patients seek information about their diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment options, and in today's society, this has largely occurred online,

as well as from other patients and family members. Social media represent a key teaching opportunity for medical professionals to disseminate credible, evidence-based information. Social media could also provide a key mechanism to heighten awareness of clinical trials in healthcare and drive participation. Social media have the capacity to become a very useful tool in conducting clinical research, but their use must be in compliance with the applicable regulatory laws at all levels. Strategies that aim to inform and educate the public on the condition being studied have been linked to improvements in recruitment. A lucrative usage of social media pertaining to clinical research is the creation of a trial-specific interactive forum by an investigator or clinical research organization. This can be used to publicize the trial, use it as a platform for educating people about the disease being studied, and as a means of collecting data such related to their quality of life. There is currently no way to either verify information posted by prospective participants or to ensure the accuracy of postings.

At present, there is a considerable lack of guidance for doctors on the appropriate use of social media in clinical practice and research. A majority of guidelines recommend establishing institutional ownership of the social media activities. The separation of personal and professional social media activities is addressed in a majority of policies. Many social media sites include "add as friend" to increase one's personal network. Befriending of patients, or even ex-patients, is strongly discouraged in many policies in an effort to preserve the boundaries of the professional physician-patient relationship.

Social media holds tremendous potential for a more interactive experience and enhanced opportunities to influence care delivery. Given the ever increasing popularity and of social media medical professionals should be encouraged to learn more and engage in this ongoing evolution. Regulations that exist to protect patients' privacy and care should also be reviewed to apply to the use of social media more effectively in the current scenario.

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Department of Orthopedic Oncology, Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Address for correspondence:

Dr. Ashish Gulia,
Department of Orthopedic Oncology, Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. E-mail: aashishgulia@gmail.com

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