

Social media and the medical profession

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Abstract

Social media is now increasingly being used by various professionals to enhance the professional outcome and solve the day to day problems and enrich their knowledge but the medical fraternity is lagging behind in this race. Medical professionals are using social media for private use but for professional use, trend is of hesitant use. There are two groups on the social media, one is of consumers and other is of providers and medical professionals best fit in the second category due to their knowledge, experience, and expertise but newly registered doctors fall into the first category. Limited use of social media is due to ignorance and fear of legal problems.

Objective and purpose of this paper are to make medical professionals aware about the potentials, advantages, disadvantages, ethical issues, limitations, challenges and precautions about using the social media so that medical professionals can use the social media in a better and safe way.

Keywords: Social media, apps, medical profession, blogging, medical education, ethics of social media

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Introduction

Social media are the tools based upon the internet, used to share information, communicate or discuss with each other through apps, networking and bookmarking websites and blogs. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit are some of its examples (1). There are professional groups like LinkedIn and Research Gate where professional people seek the help of other professionals for routine professional work and research in their fields (2). This is a form of electronic communication(3) which can be done either by using computers or cellular phones (4). There are community sites and blogs, which are experts based and provide accurate and authentic information to patients and relatives of patients interested in knowing the A_Z about the disease, treatment and taking care of the patient (5).

Social media is now used by all professionals varying from nursing professionals(6), paramedical professionals, medical students (7) and medical professionals (8). Use of social media has increased tremendously during the last few years by the general public and its use by medical students and doctors is also increasing but is associated with many complexities (9).

Persons using more internet (mostly young persons) are more inclined to participate effectively on social media with the medical practitioners as compared to those who use less of the internet (mostly elder persons) (10).

50% of the population of the UK is now on the Facebook alone but this has to do nothing with being a doctor as this is being used for personal communication rather than professional communication (11).

Women use the internet more as compared to males to search the health information and rely more on this and are easily convinced by health related awareness campaigns whereas men are interested in a virtual relationship with their general practitioners so the general practitioners may offer men as targets for more online services (12). There are cultural differences and these differences are significant when information processing preferences are considered for online health information(13).

In one study conducted in Australia and published in 2014, 25% of doctors never used any social media and most of the participants used social media privately. About 20% of participants got a friend request from a patient. Only 30.5% of medical practitioners ever communicated with a patient through email and 48.5% provided their patient electronic information as per the interest of the patient. 60% of the practitioners were not uncomfortable if their patients had prior knowledge about them from the social sites. 65% of the practitioners were hesitant to use it being afraid of legal concerns about using social media (14).

The importance of social media is evident from the fact that 60% of the people using the internet also seek health information on the internet (15). Less use of the social media by the medical professionals is probably due to moral panic (11). There were 173 million internet users in India in 2014 (2) which increased to 462 million in 2016 which is about 34.8% of the Indian population (1,326,801,576) and which is about 13.5% of internet users in the world (16) and this tells the unused potential for the medical fraternity.

Aims and objectives of this study are to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of social media and discuss ethics involved in the use of social media. We need to know the precautions to be taken while using social media to avoid ethical hazards and legal issues.

Advantages

Social media helps to build a community of people who are like minded where they can share their problems and find solutions from peers (3) and seniors and share the knowledge with patients and students (2).

Social media has made it possible to attend to the needs of the patient even at odd hours without the need of the patient to come to the doctor and is a good medium for the doctor to stay connected with the patient when it is the need of the hour and simultaneously doctor can do other work (17).

Presence on social media increases the number of patients and increases benefits to the organization to which the doctor belongs. People are now searching for specialists and facilities before they actually go. They read the reviews of the patients and then make up their mind to visit a doctor or a hospital (18). This helps them to rank the doctors, health institutions and medicines by studying the reviews (15). In China, about 37% of the doctors have been reviewed on the Good Doctors websites and gynecologists and obstetricians top the list of doctors who have been reviewed followed by the surgeons and Traditional Chinese Medicine (19).

Insurance companies, drug manufacturing companies, and employers may keep a tab on the social media to find the useful information for their benefits and for the benefits of the communities (20). It is easier for an employer to judge an applicant from the strong presence on social media than actually to know from the application and the written statements for the job (7).

Social media helps to find the jobs which may be available locally or internationally. There are many search engines for finding jobs in India e.g. Monster and TimesJobs or internationally e.g. CareerJet and FreshWorld (21).

Disadvantages

Social media has the disadvantage that privacy of the patients may be leaked if proper precautions are not observed(2). Use of social media is tricky and sensitive information like photographs when posted on the social sites may become irretrievable and patient doctor relationship may become problematic due to self-disclosure by the patients and doctors. Privacy of both the doctors and patients may be compromised as third parties may also get the information which may not be in the best interest of the patient or the doctor (20).

Social media usage for communication may become a distracter for professional practice which may decrease the quality of interaction with the patients (3). Increased use of social media brings with it marketers and advertisers who may post information which may be inaccurate and products may be unsafe(5). Sometimes jokes are made on the medical profession which lowers the dignity of the doctors as 39.7% of such jokes are made at the expense of the doctors and 19.9% jokes are dirty humors on the doctors but these jokes are mostly put by divorced, separated or widowed persons (22).

Why should it be used?

It is considered a social gift which can be used for the benefit of the community to make them aware of the social medical problems (2). It has great potential for the knowledge to be disseminated to the general public in situations of natural disasters like earthquakes and floods (2). Chronic patients when sharing their information other patients can also get an insight about their diseases and have a social support group to know how to handle the disease and help in reduction of isolation of the patients(20).

Where should it be used?

Where the medical facilities are less or are present at some select places e.g. neonatal and pediatric treatment then patient transfer through the social media Naver Band apps has been very useful in Korea. The patient transfer rate increased to 65% by obstetricians and 40% by pediatricians using this social media app. Time taken to transfer the patients were also decreased. This app is more popular than the Facebook in Korea (23).

When should it be used?

Social media may be used by general practitioners while fixing the appointments, referring to the other doctors and discussing lab tests reports which are normal (12). When medical professionals wish to draw attention to a social health issue and raise money for this cause social media is good avenue (15).

How should it be used?

Doctors have started using social media in the form of WhatsApp groups to share the information belonging to their specialties (8). When websites are used by professionals to discuss it is necessary that in such groups only verified and registered users should be able to communicate, their participation should be protected by passwords and participants should put opinions which are authentic and evidence based (3).

What should be used?

While exposing himself to the social networking sites physician should use accurate information and should maintain the integrity of the information preferably making it evidence based (3).

Ethics

“Special Committee on Ethics and Professionalism adopted as policy by the House of Delegates of the Federation of State Medical Boards” has issued “Model Guidelines for the appropriate use of Social Media and Social Networking in Medical Practice” mentioning that doctor patient communication should not be done on personal social media like Facebook as privacy of the patient should be respected and it should not violate the laws of the country (3).

Same professional regulations apply to online communication as apply to the offline profession and cyber bullying should be avoided. Online request for a prescription should be avoided and nothing should be posted which help in revealing the identity of the patient (3). When using social media all the rules of state medical councils or boards should be followed where they are registered (3).

Precautions

Nothing should be revealed on the social websites which can expose the identity of the patient (3).

Experts while commenting during a discussion on the websites must reveal their conflict of interest if any if they are commenting as a physician and should never post an ambiguous information (3).

Moderator of websites should delete any wrong information or information which can expose the identity of any patient (3).

Personal email should be used while logging in social sites when using it for the personal purposes otherwise name of the institution may be at stake and all rules and regulations of the employer should be followed regarding use of social networking when appearing as an employee of a particular institution (3).

The doctor should avoid posting on social websites e.g. drinking parties which may diminish the respect of the patient towards physician (3) and patient doctor relationship may be affected due to this questionable behavior (24).

Disclaimers should be posted where ever required so that patients are not misled (5).

Keeping the patients on friend list though may look innocuous but should be desisted to avoid complications later on (24).

Penal Actions

State medical councils and boards can take penal actions for violating online ethical professional behavior (3) e.g. online patient confidentiality violations, online showing of intoxicated behavior, false credentials and

derogatory or discriminatory language or behavior (3). Penal actions may take the form of revocation, suspension or limitation of the license (3).

Material and methods

Search has been carried out on Googles for the relevant websites as well as on Web of Science to find the related articles.

Discussion

Social media has the advantage that it can reach a large number of patients and persons involved with them and that also a very low cost with the additional advantage that any information can be updated at any time. All the stakeholders in the medical profession are now using social media due to advancement in technology and availability of smart phones, computers, laptops, tablets. Right from medical students, medical teachers, medical researchers and medical practitioners are using social media with increasing frequency and amount. Social media is a source which needs to be made use of for the benefit to the medical fraternity and still, this source is untapped (2).

Patients with chronic diseases can share their experiences and doctors can get an insight into chronic patient's problems and empower them (20)

Further research is required on the uses and challenges of social media in the medical fraternity to make it more beneficial and safe to all the stakeholders (25). If one is not using social media one should start using it and be visible on media by being social, using the expertise of his character or education and be passionate about it (7).

World Medical Association has suggested to every country that they should make guidelines for the use of doctors in their countries (26).

Doctors should not hesitate and should use new technologies to interact with the patients (11)

Conclusion

Social media has a lot of advantages and it will be stupid not to embrace it. There are some ethical issues and other challenges but we should learn how to tackle these problems.

All the physicians and medical students should understand that perception of the medical profession will be according to what material they are posting on the social websites and should be very careful while posting. For the sake of profession any wrong behaviors of the colleague should be pointed out to him and if he does not desist should be pointed to the concerned authorities.

All the information available is open to review by peers and experts so there will be a continuous improvement in the information. It is challenging to keep pace with the ethical requirements of the online use of social media but considering the benefits it can provide to the medical fraternity and their patients, medical fraternity will have to accept this challenge and continuously tackle the ethical issues emerging from time to time by the use of newer technology and advances in the field of social media.

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