
Volume 14, Issue 2/2012 - Social Media

The Next Step for Patient-Centred Care?

Today we can't imagine working without emails and online resources; the Internet has become an integral part of our everyday lives. In the future, I believe all organisations, including healthcare institutions, will feel the same way about social media. Through this article I want to introduce you to the most common forms of social media and illustrate how they can be used within the healthcare sector. I spoke to healthcare practitioners, to so-called pioneers of social media both in Europe and the United States to find out how and why they are using social media and what benefits it has for both patients and institutions.

The phenomenon was instantly adopted by the younger generation but social media sites now boast huge numbers of users from all age groups. Life is fast paced and we seem to have an insatiable thirst for knowledge. People want information in real time, i.e. as it happens. Moreover, it is not just about reading the latest news/information it is also about commenting on it. Social media allows for conversations and debates. People will no longer blindly accept information as correct. They research it, ask their friends on Twitter and Facebook. Health information is not exempt from this.

In fact, last year the Washington Post reported the results of a study on the most common Internet searches. The study showed that looking up health information is the third most common activity by US Internet users. Eight out of ten users claimed to use the Internet to look up health information for themselves as well as for friends and family members.

There is no doubt that our patients are taking a more active role in their care by researching health information. The question is do we get involved and ensure patients get the correct information or stand back and watch it from the sidelines?

To Tweet or not to Tweet?

Yes, most of our hospitals have websites with practical information but 21st century patients want more than just maps and lists of services and telephone numbers. They want to interact with physicians and fellow patients and watch video clips just like they can do on their favourite social media sites. But many managers have an inherent fear of using social media in an official capacity. The risks are easy to spot. We cannot ignore the rational fear of losing of control of your message, of opening yourself and your institution up for criticism. The question is whether the benefits of social media outweigh the risks.

The Physician Blogger Perspective

To get a better idea of how physicians and hospitals are using social media I spoke to Dr. Wendy Sue Swanson, a paediatrician and health blogger in Seattle. She explained how she writes a blog, uses twitter on a daily basis and is also a member of many other sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Dr. Swanson describes her blog,

Seattlemamadoc.seattlechildrens.org as a repository of her thoughts, "when new research comes out which is controversial or when a parenting controversy happens... then I can write a blog and explain my thoughts as a paediatrician, as a mom and as a community member."

Dr. Swanson is fortunate in that her institution supports her blog in two ways: By paying her a half-time salary to blog and by building her website. For her, the most important thing is that she has full editorial control, the last thing she wants is for her blog to sound like a communications or marketing department. Her blog is about reaching out to the parents of her patients, to other physicians and her community in general. During consultations she often refers her patients to her blog so they can read a post or watch a short video on the issue in question. She is also keen to stress that the blog does not contain personal health information, it is a source of health information written from her vantage point as an expert on what she believes families need to know.

But how did she get her institution on board? Well, her reasoning was, "rather than being the sound bite on the news why not provide great content and great information in a place where people trust, an academic health institution but instead of responding a month later we could respond a couple of hours or a day or a week later through a blog." Luckily they agreed and placed their trust in Dr. Swanson, moving around some of the marketing and communications budget to compensate her for her work.

Swanson is aware that most physicians are not in a position to go to the CEO and get their instant approval for a blog but her hospital recognised

her passion for the topic and saw the benefits for both patient and institution, “I think I created an opportunity out of a need for earnest communication and I believe it exists everywhere and I think the benefit to the hospital is twofold. I serve the mission of the hospital, which is trying to improve and cure paediatric disease but I also provide a really personal brand for the hospital which is that I am a doctor, my children have been patients there, my husband is a physician at the hospital. We are telling the real story of healthcare and I think that is what the public deserves and wants.”

Do the Benefits Outweigh the Risks?

The main risks centre around a lack of control and financial and manpower issues. It is true that information is harder to moderate in social media but it does allow for better communication between provider and customer. Ultimately, the extent to which social media is used within the hospital is up to the management. To be successful, boundaries must be discussed and rules and protocols developed; transparency is key and only general health information should be shared. Denise Silber gives us a few ideas of how and why to get started (see below).

Conscious of the financial issue, Dr. Swanson strongly believes that social media can help hospitals through these tough financial times. Social media can actually save physicians and hospitals time and therefore money. This is apparent on two levels. Firstly, through these new technologies we can sometimes communicate more efficiently than in person. A five-minute online chat can save time for both the patient and healthcare providers. Secondly, social media can be a great source of information for our patients meaning they will come to appointments much more informed about their condition. This source of information can also promote preventive healthcare and is especially useful for patients with chronic conditions.

As we continue to focus on patient-centred care and management with patients making decisions in the care process, social media is a great facilitator of this new and improved patient- doctor relationship. It is clear that patients expect their physicians and healthcare institutions to embrace these new technologies and communicate through them.

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