

Professionalism in the Use of Social Media by Physicians and Medical Students: Concerns, Benefits and Ethical Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, there has been an advent of several social media platforms specific and non-specific to medical profession. There is also a rise unregulated online engagement of healthcare professionals and medical students with their colleague, patients and general population. Concerns range from reports of patients stalking their physician, health care professionals disclosing private information about patients, medical students' blogging or sharing online descriptions of patients under their care, violation of patients' privacy and conflicts of interest. Despite the presence of several guidelines on use of social media by physicians, there is still a lack of awareness and practice among the healthcare professionals, including medical students. There is also a lack of training among physicians towards correct usage of social media. This commentary aims to discuss some of these issues and suggest reasonable solutions along with a brief discussion on benefits and concerns of social media usage among physicians and medical students.

Key words: social media, professionalism, students, physician, ethical.

INTRODUCTION

Digital medicine is the convergence of healthcare with information and communication technology and may include telecommunication, computational technologies, mobile based applications, web-based analysis and medical imaging. Web based and mobile based social media is a small but invaluable part of rapidly developing digital medicine and healthcare. Many healthcare professionals including physicians, surgeons, hospital administrators, public health experts and medical students and residents have been using social media over past few years for personal and professional reasons. However, this involves several barely-discussed but indispensable sensitive issues of violation of patients' privacy, poor quality and unprofessional information dissemination and other ethical and legal issues. What makes this issue important in the Indian context is the lack of any uniform guidelines, policies and training on the ethical and legal implications and professionally correct way of using social media.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA

Web 2.0 is the transition of internet from conventional static web pages to dynamic and user-generated content and social media. Social network sites are essentially web-based services that

allow individuals to create a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system [1].

The character and definitions of these connections may vary from site to site. These may include web-based or mobile-based social media applications or in some cases, both. The term social media may include more popular platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn or profession-specific, user-selective platforms like Figure1, Plexus MD, Curofy and Doc plexus. Blogging platforms are also widely used by healthcare professionals for information dissemination and self-marketing.

What are the Benefits

Social media platforms are used by healthcare professionals for professional networking, read articles, keep up to date with recent developments and policy changes, consult colleagues, share medical cases, market their practice, engage in discussions and also as a tool to engage and interact with patients and promote health behaviors among general population [2].

Multiple governmental, non-governmental, research and healthcare related organizations and agencies also use social media platforms for organizational promotion, advocacy campaigns and to promote public health behavior.

Patients, on the other hand, use social media for searching health-related information, looking for doctors, consulting online opinions from doctors, social support and self-care [3].

The most unregulated yet substantial use of social media platforms is made by medical students and junior residents. They use these platforms for wide variety of activities, some of them bordering on ethical and legal dilemmas. Social media is used for professional development, information learning, informal communication and discussion with senior doctors and colleagues.

Social media platforms offer the advantage of rapid and critical peer review and effective professional development for doctors and cheaper, easier and extremely effective advocacy campaigns for organizations and also to assess, manage and extend professional reputation and/or promote your brand.

What are the Concerns

Social media platforms provide a fake sense of anonymity and security to its users which have far-reaching implications in healthcare scenario. Healthcare professionals disclosing private information of their patients for the sake of consultation with peer and senior violates patients' privacy. Sometimes, doctors have been found to intentionally or unintentionally make personal or defamatory comments online, about patients and colleagues that have landed them in legal soup later. There have also been reports of patients stalking their physicians and judging the professional competency and reliability of doctors through their online activities, of which doctors are themselves unaware of at most times. Often, content posted on social media in a momentary lapse of judgment could have far reaching ethical implications and extensive and permanent internet coverage. Moreover, recent attitude of general public and media towards doctors may amplify and distort the supposedly unprofessional behavior of healthcare professionals [4].

Another crucial issue is the unregulated, unreliable yet extensive healthcare information shared on social media platforms. Receiving and transmitting misleading information from unregulated communities and pages have very significant and direct impact on behavior and attitude of general public towards health. The main limitation of health information shared on social media is their poor quality and lack of validity. More often than not, these are unreferenced, incomplete, obsolete or distorted.

A major risk of social media usage is the sharing of unprofessional content that could damage the image of a professional or an organization. Behavior that could be construed as unprofessional include doctors taking pictures inside an operating room, sexual suggestiveness, using profane and discriminatory language, venting frustration against colleagues, disclosing patients information and depictions of intoxications. Privacy and Confidentiality are integral to the

patient-health care professional relationship, since preserving patient trust is essential for competent clinical care [5].

PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINES

Many professional organizations have come up with guidelines on ethically and legally correct way of using social media. A well-formulated guideline should at first examine ethical, legal and professional challenges of using social media by healthcare professionals and medical students and also be flexible enough to accommodate benefits of using social media while carefully balancing it with the need to maintain patient confidentiality and to protect from patients' privacy violation.

“WMA Statement on the professional and ethical use of social media”, adopted by the 62nd WMA General Assembly in 2011 urges the National Medical Association to establish guidelines for their physicians addressing the important issues of social media like patient privacy, physician-patient relationship and conflicts of interest [6]. It also recommends the inclusion of educational programs with relevant case studies and appropriate guidelines in medical curricula and continuing medical education [6].

British Medical Association has issued a practical and ethical guidance for doctors and medical students on using social media. It appropriately discusses and provides ethical guidelines on maintaining patient confidentiality and doctor-patient relationship through practical suggestions on Facebook friend requests and declaring conflicts of interest. It also examines the issue of medical students and doctors sharing digital images online and its repercussion on their recruitment and professional image [7]. “Opinion 9.124 - Professionalism in the Use of Social Media (AMA Code of Medical Ethics)” issued by American Medical Association discusses certain rules of engagement that advises physicians to maintain patient confidentiality, to provide accurate and truthful information, to act with collegiality, to avoid anonymity, to declare conflicts of interest and to maintain separate personal and professional profiles among other issues [8].

India: Unprepared and Overwhelmed

India has paralleled the rapid growth of social media usage among physicians and medical students for personal communication and professional development. There have also been reports of unethical utilization of social media, intentionally or unintentionally, largely due to lack of guidelines and training. None of the numerous professional organizations or educational institutes across India has released a framework or guidance on ethical use of social media. Although, “Code of Ethics Regulations, 2002” by Medical Council of India discusses duties and responsibilities of the physician in general, including maintenance of medical records, duties of physicians to sick, unethical acts and misconduct, it largely remains untouched to online behavior of physicians and medical students [9]. Lack of guidance, training and framework on use of social media by healthcare professionals leave it open to interpretation.

As a solution, Medical Council of India urgently needs to draft a regulation on social media usage among physicians and medical students which should define ethical implications of social media and guidelines on proper conduct and behavior by healthcare professionals on internet. MCI should consider including educational programs with relevant case studies and appropriate guidelines in medical curricula and continuing medical education. Physicians need to be trained on ethically correct way of using social media and awareness program should be launched for general public on physician-patient relationship, maintaining patient confidentiality and validity of healthcare information.

THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN HEALTHCARE

With the rapid growth of digital health and Web 2.0, social media has potentially inexplicable role to play in the future of healthcare. Social media provides patient an opportunity to openly interact with physicians and share opinion with other patients. Online support group through

blogging and communities have become an integral part of rehabilitation. Live-tweeting of medical conferences and online medical conferences and webinars is a boon for professionals from lower and middle income countries who are unable to travel due to financial reasons. Live surgery broadcasting and 360 degree VR surgery through Oculus Rift or Google Glass allows medical students and trainee surgeons to immerse themselves in the procedure in real time, sometimes for extremely rare and high-end surgeries [10]. User Driven Health Care like Mission Arogya crowd-sources tough medical diagnosis and helps address the low doctor to patient ratio, specifically specialists, in rural India [11]. Free Open Access Meducation (FOAM) and other online education and professional development courses, webinars and media is an asset for innumerable medical students and young physicians across the world, otherwise constrained by lack of resources and finance.

CONCLUSION

The world today is technology driven and social media and healthcare have the potential to go hand in hand. In a vastly diverse and large country like India, with inequitable resource distribution, social media can play a pivotal role for professional development and healthcare availability. There is an urgent requirement of training and guidance on online behavior and practice among healthcare professionals and medical students including awareness program among patients on reliability of healthcare information found on internet. With the changing landscape of healthcare in India, social media can either act as a boon or a bane, depending on how we, the medical community, react to it.

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Acknowledgements - Nil
Source of Funding – Nil
Conflict of Interest – Nil