

Brief communication

Medical Professional and Usage of Social Media

Yousuf R¹, Bakar SMA², Haque M³, Islam MN⁴, Salam A⁵

Abstract

Social media connect people by sharing text, photos, audio and videos among themselves. Medical professional and patients also communicate through social media; however, issues of privacy and confidentiality of medical professions in regards to medical and health care decisions contradict with the openness of the usage of social media. Member of the medical profession can use social media but need to abide by the code of conduct of medical ethics in order to render the best possible services. This paper emphasizes on the needs of inclusion of social media usage in future health care providers' curriculum by the higher educational institutions in order to aware of the ethical and professional aspect.

Keywords: social media usage; medical professionals; code of conduct

Bangladesh Journal of Medical Science Vol. 16 No. 04 October'17. Page : 606-609

Introduction

Social media are the online or electronic communication sites for connecting people with each other. It allows them to share text, photos, audio and videos among themselves¹. The online application sites can be categorized into five groups: i) Wikipedia which are common projects ii) Blogger, Twitter iii) YouTube, the content communities iv) Facebook, the social network sites and v) virtual games or social worlds such as HumanSim². Medical professionals use the social media to potentially improve health outcomes, develop a professional network, increase personal awareness of news and discoveries, motivate patients, and provide health information to the community³. Through social media, patients also can communicate with their physicians and with other patients affected by similar condition and thus play a more active role in their healthcare decisions⁴. However, in medical profession, the value of privacy, confidentiality and one-on-one interaction contradicts with the openness, sharing, transparency and informality of the social media⁴. This paper

briefly describes the benefits and challenges of social media usage by medical professionals in order to aware the ethical and professional aspect.

Benefits of using social media

Social network disseminates information very quickly which influences and mobilizes people instantly. Therefore, social media can be utilized to improve patient-physician interactions to enhance patient motivation and drive awareness, to provide accurate information, to raise timely issues, and to discuss important issues by engaging a larger community aimed to improve the health systems⁴. Some physicians use social media professionally to find and share health information about professional problems and clinical experiences, communicate/network with colleagues and trainees, disseminate their research, market their practice, or engage in health advocacy and some even use directly interact with patients in terms of clinical care^{5,6,7,8}. Sixty five (65)% of the physicians use these sites for professional reasons such as to read news articles, listen to experts, research new medical developments, networks and

1. Rabeya Yousuf, Department of Pathology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (The National University of Malaysia) Medical Centre
2. Sheikh Muhammad Abu Bakar, Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya
3. Mainul Haque Unit of Pharmacology, National Defense University of Malaysia
4. Md Nurul Islam, Faculty of Dentistry, SEGI University, Malaysia
5. Abdus Salam, Faculty of Medicine, Asia Metropolitan University, Malaysia.

Correspondence to: Dr. Abdus Salam, Associate Professor and Chairperson, Medical Education and Quality Assurance, Asia Metropolitan University, Malaysia E mail: abdussalam.dr@gmail.com, salam@amu.edu.my

communicate with colleague with patient issues⁹. Medical students also uses various social networking sites for different educational activities such as to create learning communities and to provide opportunities to help and support other learners for activities such as getting assistance or sharing notes etc^{10,11}. It is also mentioned that many educational settings support traditional face-to-face training via social media seminars and many educators also use blogs for teaching and communicating with students². On the other hand, patients or consumers of healthcare services are benefitted from social media by gathering information and sharing experiences through these forums with the physicians or with other patients. A survey report showed that, 56% of the patients wanted to use social media as a means of communication such as for getting appointment and reminders, for reporting of the diagnostic test results, for health information sharing, prescription notifications, and also answering general questions^{5,12}. Thus proper use of social media can allow the healthcare organizations to build trust, promote the management of health and wellness and disseminate knowledge¹³.

Challenges in social media usage

While social media serves a great advantage to the medical professions, at the same time carries a greater risk in terms of legal, ethical, personal, and professional aspects¹⁴. Therefore, physicians and medical students using social media should pay attention to the ethical sensitivity in their relationships with patients².

Breaches of confidentiality

Breaches of confidentiality of patient information is an important issue in health care profession. It is the legal and ethical duty of medical professionals to protect patient confidentiality. All communication between the patient and physician, whether in person or online should follow the standards for professional interactions which involves rights and obligations for both parties¹⁵. Publishing photos and videos of patients on social media without their consent are the breach of confidentiality and privacy of the patient¹⁴. A survey reported lack of knowledge regarding the ethical issues of using social media by medical students and residents where at least 12 instances of potential patient violations occurs by posting photographs of care they provided to individuals during a medical mission. Although they did not post any identifiable patient information in text form, it was still considered as breach of confidentiality of patient information¹⁶. There are many other instances

documenting breach of confidentiality of the patients mentioned in the popular media such as articles headlines as: “Medical students’ cadaver photos get scrutiny after images show up online”, “Nursing students expelled from university after posting pictures of themselves posing with a human placenta on Facebook”, “Fired for Facebook: ER personnel lost their jobs for online posts”, etc⁴. In the above mentioned nursing students’ case, even the picture of placenta does not identify the patient and the picture was deleted within three hours of posting, still the students faced the penalty by the lawsuits¹⁷. Medical professionals have the responsibility to use social network in an ethical manner to maintain the patients’ privacy rights⁹. Medical students and residents being at the early stage of their career may not be aware about how their publicly available content is a direct reflection on their professionalism. Unknowingly, medical educators, colleagues, employers and even patients may have access to view their content online^{18,19,20}. The posted comments and pictures may be misinterpreted and the outcome may not be in favour of them. Patients’ accessibility to the private life of their physician through social media may affect the mutual confidence between physician and patient. For example if a patient find his doctor with embarrassing photos such as drinking excessively in a party during off –duty hour may make patient doubt regarding the quality of care provided during work hour²¹. Employers can also find the uploaded contents as inappropriate and unprofessional that can lead to disciplinary action against them. Even the future employers can scrutinize the contents in the social media as part of the recruitment process and any bad impression over their can threaten or damage the career prospect of the individual²².

Doctor-patient relationship

It is important to maintain standards for professional interactions between the doctor and patient in all forms of personal or online communication to maintain the rights and obligations for both parties¹⁵. Patient initiated online “friend” requests to their physicians on Facebook should be declined, as Facebook profiles usually contain personal information that is not supposed to be disclosed in a face-to-face interaction²¹. British Medical Association (BMA) recommends that doctors and medical students should not accept Facebook friend requests from current or former patients and they should be conscious of their online image and how it may impact on their professional standing²². It is suggested that, instead of face book friend with the patient, it is more

professional to create a separate website specifically designed for posts regarding medical events, so that the health care professionals can discuss with the patient's and follow up them in a more professional way to solve the problem^{3,23}. Medical professionals should know the privacy settings and monitor the regular updates of Facebook's privacy policy to adjust their data protection²¹.

Professionalism

Professionalism drives a person's appearance, personal and professional interactions, and presents first impression on others²⁴. Medical professionals requires high standards of behaviour in terms of core values of professionalism such as honesty, accountability, confidentiality, responsibility, compassion, honour and respect for others²⁵. Thus medical professionals have a great responsibility not only in dealing with the patients or in professional life but also in their personal life. Use of social media can influence the people's personal and professional life⁴. It is important for the medical professionals to maintain the professional attitude regarding social media use. Member of the medical profession are need to abide by the code of conduct of medical ethics in order to render the best possible services to the humanity and to maintain the honours and dignity of the profession²⁶. Any unprofessional posting in public domain may cause unfavourable impact on medical professionals and even the institutes²³. There could be negative professional consequences if the information featured in a social media profile in terms of photos, nicknames, posts, and comments liked or shared, as well as the friends, causes, organizations, games, and media that a person follows²⁷. A qualitative analysis of publicly available Facebook accounts of medical students showed foul language, sexist comments and photographs with alcohols

or patients' privacy violation in a small number of public accounts²⁰. In another survey in USA, showed that 60% of US medical schools reported students posting of unprofessional content online where there were 30% of violations of patient confidentiality. Other indiscretions included profanity (52%), discriminatory language (48%), drunken behaviour (39%) and sexually suggestive material (38%)²⁸. Unprofessional uploaded content have implications on the professional reputation as well as compromise a physician's trustworthiness and the credibility of the working institution and can erode the public's confidence in the medical profession¹. Therefore it is important for the medical professionals to bind to the standards while on duty or off duty and to use social media in such a way not to lose the confidence of public to medical profession²². Professionals should be alert while giving opinions on forums and blogs in such a way that these statements should not harm the rights and reputations of others. If they do so then the defamation law can be applied against them²⁹. There are published social media guideline^{22,29} describing the professional principles applied to online and offline content which the medical professionals should abide by when posting online. The educational institutions should include the professional principles of digital media usage in their curriculum, despite curriculum customization is one of the important difficulties facing by the institution^{30,31}.

Conclusion

Social media provide many opportunities to the medical and health care professionals but at the same time there are numerous challenges and ethical issues to the users. Therefore, medical professionals can use social media but need to be aware of the ethical and professional aspects before using it. Medical and health care institutions should implement policies on the usage of social media and should include it in the curriculum. Proper training on the ethical and professional usage of social media tools is warranted for the benefit of the patients and physicians.

References

1. Budd L, Physician tweet thyself: A guide for integrating social media into medical practice. *BCMJ* 2013; **55**(1): 38-40.
2. Avci K, Celikden SG, Eren S, Aydenizöz D. Assessment of medical students' attitudes on social media use in medicine: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Med Educ* 2015; **15**:18 DOI 10.1186/s12909-015-0300-y
3. Ventola CL. Social Media and Health Care Professionals: Benefits, Risks, and Best Practices. *Pharmacy and Therapeutics*. 2014; **39**(7):491-520.
4. George DR, Rovniak LS, Kraschewski JL. Dangers and opportunities for social media in medicine. *Clin Obstet Gynecol*. 2013; **56**(3):10.1097/

- GRF.0b013e318297dc38DOI:10.1097/GRF.0b013e318297dc38.
5. Chretien KC, Kind T. Social Media and Clinical Care Ethical, Professional, and Social Implications. *Circulation* 2013; **127**: 1413-1421. DOI:10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.112.128017
 6. Hyman JL, Luks HJ, Sechrest R. Online professional networks for physicians: risk management. *ClinOrthopRelat Res.* 2012; **470**(5):1386–92.
 7. Anikeeva O, Bywood P. Social media in primary health care: opportunities to enhance education, communication and collaboration among professionals in rural and remote locations Did you know? Practical practice pointers. *Aust J Rural Health.* 2013; **21**:132–4.
 8. Ferdig RE, Dawson K, Black EW, Black NMP, Thompson LA. Medical students' and residents' use of online social networking tools: Implications for teaching professionalism in medical education. *First Monday* 2008, **13**(9) retrieved on 12 January from: <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2161/2026>.
 9. Househ M. The use of social media in healthcare: organizational, clinical, and patient perspectives. In: Courtney KL et al (eds). *Enabling health and health care through ICT: Available, tailored and closer.* Amsterdam, Netherland. *IOS press* 2013 pp244–248. DOI:10.3233/978-1-61499-203-5-244.
 10. Gill J, Harrison B, Ramnanan CJ, Wood TJ, Jalali A. Facebook, Twitter and #MedEd: Investigating Social Networking Usage among Medical. *Education in Medicine Journal*2014; **6** (4): e82-e86.
 11. Gafni R, Deri M. Costs and Benefits of Facebook for Undergraduate Students. *IJKM.* 2012; **7**: 45-61.
 12. Fisher J, Clayton M. Who gives a tweet: assessing patients' interest in the use of social media for health care. *Worldviews Evid Based Nurs.* 2012; **9**:100–108.
 13. Peluchette J, Karl K, Coustasse A. Physicians, Patients, and Facebook: Could you? Would you? Should you? *Southern Management Association Annual Meeting.* New Orleans, Louisiana. 7 Nov 2013. Retrieved on 18 December 2015 from: http://mds.marshall.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1107&context=mgmt_faculty
 14. Pillow MT, Hopson L, Bond M, Cabrera D, Patterson L, Pearson D, Sule H, Ankel F, Fernández-Frackelton M, Hall RV, Kegg JA, Norris D, TakenakaK. Social Media Guidelines and Best Practices: Recommendations from the Council of Residency Directors Social Media Task Force. *West J Emerg Med* 2014; **15**(1):26-30.
 15. Farnan JM, Sulmasy LS, Worster BK, Chaudhry HJ, Rhyne JA, Arora VM. Online Medical Professionalism: Patient and Public Relationships: Policy Statement From the American College of Physicians and the Federation of State Medical Boards. *Ann Intern Med.* 2013; **158**(8):620-627.
 16. Thompson LA, Black E, Duff WP, Black NP, Saliba H, Dawson K. Protected Health Information on Social Networking Sites: Ethical and Legal Considerations. *J Med Internet Res* 2011; **13**(1):e8 DOI: 10.2196/jmir.1590.
 17. Daily Mail (2011). Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1343628/4-nursing-students-expelled-posting-Facebook-human-placenta-pictures.html#ixzz3mQyRppFh> (accessed on 22 September 2015).
 18. Pescosolido BA, Tuch SA, Martin JK. The profession of medicine and the public: Examining Americans' changing confidence in physician authority from the beginning of the 'health care crisis' to the era of health care reform. *J Health SocBehav*2001; **42**(1): 1–16.
 19. Irvine D. The doctors' tale: Professionalism and public trust. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press. 2003.
 20. Thompson LA, Dawson K, Ferdig R, Black EW, Boyer, Coutts J, Black NP. The Intersection of Online Social Networking with Medical Professionalism. *J Gen Intern Med*2008; **23**(7):954–7 DOI: 10.1007/s11606-008-0538-8.
 21. Moubarak G, Guiot A, Benhamou Y, Benhamou A, Hariri S. Facebook activity of residents and fellows and its impact on the doctor-patient relationship. *Med Ethics* 2011; **37**(2):101-104. DOI:10.1136/jme.2010.036293.
 22. BMA. Using social media: Practical and ethical guidance for doctors and medical students. *British Medical Association*2011.
 23. Peck JL. Social media in nursing education: responsible integration for meaningful use. *J NursEduc* 2014; **53**(3):164–169.
 24. Khan MI. Medical Ethics/professionalism and Concept of Holistic Curriculum in a MedicalSchool. *Bangladesh J Med Sci*2014; **13** (01):5-7. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3329/bjms.v13i1.17371>
 25. Salam A, Song CO, Mazlan NF, Hassin H, Lee LS, Abdullah MH. A pilot study on professionalism of future medical professionals in UniversitiKebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Medical Centre. *ProcediaSocBehavSci*2012; **60**: 534 – 540.
 26. TalukderMHK ,Nazneen R , Hossain MZ , Ishrat JC. Basic ideas on medical ethics. *Bangladesh J Med Sci*2010; **9** (3): 131-135
 27. Bernhardt JM, Alber J, Gold RS. A social media primer for professionals: digital do's and don'ts. *Health PromotPract*2014; **15**(2): 168–172.
 28. Chretien KC, Greysen S, Chretien JP, Kind T. Online Posting of Unprofessional Content by Medical Students. *JAMA.* 2009; **302**(12):1309-1315. DOI:10.1001/jama.2009.1387.
 29. AMC. Social Media and the Medical Profession: A guide to online professionalism for medical practitioners and medical students. *Australian Medical Association.* 2010. Available at: <https://ama.com.au/social-media-and-medical-profession>.(Accessed 18 December 2015).
 30. Salam A. Input, process and output: System approach in education to assure the quality and excellence in performance. *Bangladesh J Med Sci*2015; **14**:1-2.
 31. Salam A, Mohamad N, Siraj HH, Kamarudin MA, Yaman MN, Bujang SM. Team-based learning in a medical centre in Malaysia: Perspectives of the faculty. *Natl Med J India* 2014; **27**(6):350.