Brief communication

Medical Professional and Usage of Social Media
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Abstract
Social media connect people by sharing text, photos, audio and videos among themselves. Medical professionals 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

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 decisions.⁴ 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 media⁵. 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 systems⁶. 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 care⁵,⁶,⁷,⁸. 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

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communicate with colleague with patient issues. 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. 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 students. On the other hand, patients or consumers of healthcare services are benefited 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. Thus proper use of social media can allow the healthcare organizations to build trust, promote the management of health and wellness and disseminate knowledge.

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 aspects. Therefore, physicians and medical students using social media should pay attention to the ethical sensitivity in their relationships with patients.

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 parties. Publishing photos and videos of patients on social media without their consent are the breach of confidentiality and privacy of the patient. 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 information. 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”, etc. 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 lawsuits. Medical professionals have the responsibility to use social network in an ethical manner to maintain the patients’ privacy rights. 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. 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 hour. 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 individual.

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 parties. 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 interaction. 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 standing. 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. Medical professionals should know the privacy settings and monitor the regular updates of Facebook’s privacy policy to adjust their data protection.

Professionalism

Professionalism drives a person’s appearance, personal and professional interactions, and presents first impression on others. Medical professionals require high standards of behaviour in terms of core values of professionalism such as honesty, accountability, confidentiality, responsibility, compassion, honour and respect for others. 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 life. 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 profession. Any unprofessional posting in public domain may cause unfavourable impact on medical professionals and even the institutes. 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 follows. 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 accounts. 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%). 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 profession. 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 profession. 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 them. There are published social media guideline 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.

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

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