

How social media is changing healthcare

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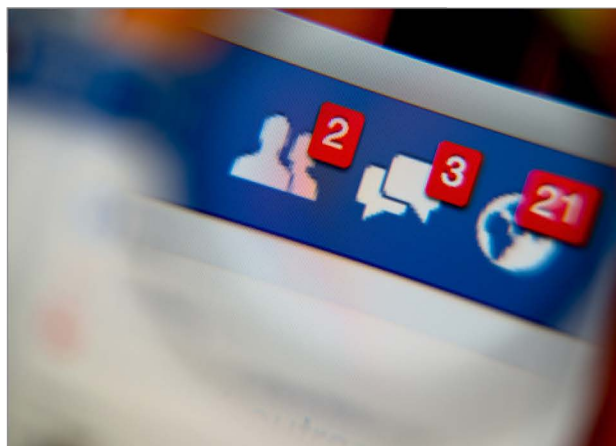
Are you digitally literate enough to be a physician?

According to Pat Rich, managing editor for *CMAJ* of the Canadian Medical Association and one of the key speakers during the 2015 Healthcare Social Media Summit in Cebu City, this is a question medical students may very well have to ask themselves in the future, as prevalent use of the Internet by both physicians and patients transforms the way healthcare services are sought and delivered. While some physicians are hesitant to incorporate social media applications into their medical practice, many patients have no such reservations and embrace the convenience of health information right at their fingertips. Here are just some of the many ways that the internet is reshaping the healthcare landscape.

“Dr Google”

More patients are now turning to the internet as their primary source of health information, said Rich. This assertion is borne out by survey data from the Pew Research Center:

- 72 percent of internet users in the US have looked for health information online in the past year
- 35 percent of all US adults have gone online specifically to determine what medical condition they or someone else might have (“online diagnosers”)



- 46 percent of online diagnosers thereafter consulted a medical professional; 38 percent decided to self-manage their condition
- 18 percent of those asked about the accuracy of their initial assessment say that the medical professional they consulted offered a different diagnosis

In the Philippines, data gathered from Social Weather Station’s surveys reveal that, as of March 2014:

- 32 percent of Filipino adults go online for various purposes
- 47 percent seek health, dieting, or fitness information online
- 29 percent seek information on health topics that are difficult to discuss, such as drug use, sexual health and depression

Considering these figures, physicians might find it worthwhile to ask patients about their use of health information from the Internet, in order to steer them towards legitimate and accurate online resources.

Social media as an instrument for public health reform

Dr Anthony Leachon, president of the Philippine College of Physicians, said social media was instrumental in the organization's efforts to secure support for the sin tax bill. He related how a thumbs-down photo taken outside a senator's office went viral on social media and led to further talks with the senator, eventually paving the way for the bill's passage.

Taiwanese physicians reported a similar success story. After years of slow-moving talks with the Department of Health regarding emergency room (ER) overcrowding, one ER physician decided to create a Facebook page called "Rescue the emergency room." As more ER practitioners joined the group, they caught the attention of the Minister of Health, who facilitated discussions with the Bureau of National Health Insurance to allocate more resources to Taiwan's emergency departments.

Disaster response and other applications

In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, crowd-sourced information helped connect health care providers requiring supplies to those who could donate them. During the 2009 influenza pandemic, a Virginia health department announced H1N1 vaccine availability via Twitter and text, and citizens arrived at vaccination sites within minutes. In the Philippines, Facebook and other social media sites played a big role in recruiting medical mission vol-

unteers, gathering medical/surgical supplies, and spotlighting other healthcare needs in the months following Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda).

Other diverse areas in which social media is transforming healthcare include:

- Online recruitment and "crowdsourcing" patients' input into clinical trials
- Attracting new patients through a medical group's online presence
- Medical and patient education
- Facebook support groups for patients with debilitating diseases
- Health-related applications for smartphones

As more people go online and rely on internet-based applications for various aspects of their lives, the intersections between social media and healthcare will only continue to grow. Kevin Pho, a US-based internist who founded the popular physician website KevinMD.com, emphasized the need for physicians to adjust to this reality by quoting Charles Darwin: "It is not the strongest of a species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."



Additional resources:

1. Pew Research Center. Health Fact Sheet. Available online at <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/health-fact-sheet/> (last accessed May 12, 2015).
2. Pew Research Center. Health Online 2013. Available online at <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/15/health-online-2013/> (last accessed May 12, 2015).
3. Labucay, I. D. (2014). Patterns of Internet usage in the Philippines. In J. D. James (Ed.), *The Internet and the Google age: Prospects and perils* (pp. 27-49). Dublin: Research-publishing.net. doi: 10.14705/rpnet.2014.000176. Available online at <http://reference.research-publishing.net/publication/chapters/978-1-908416-17-9/176.pdf> (last accessed May 12, 2015).
4. Abdul SS, Lin CW, Scholl J, et al. Facebook use leads to health-care reform in Taiwan. *Lancet*. 2011 Jun 18;377(9783):2083-4. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(11)60919-7. Available online at [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(11\)60919-7/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(11)60919-7/fulltext) (last accessed May 12, 2015).
5. Merchant RM, Elmer S, Lurie N. Integrating social media into emergency-preparedness efforts. *N Engl J Med*. 2011 Jul 28;365(4):289-91. doi: 10.1056/NEJMp1103591. Available online at <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1103591> (last accessed May 12, 2015).
6. Pew Research Center. How do we know that social media is important to health care? Available online at <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/10/21/how-do-we-know-that-social-media-is-important-to-health-care/> (last accessed May 12, 2015).