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Editorial

The potential impact of twitter on the practice of medicine

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Knowledge is power. From the point of view of the patients we treat, no statement could be truer. As leaders of the health care professions, our patients look to physicians to be knowledgeable about the myriad of ailments that we have studied for significant portions of our lives. They expect us to understand current research, and in academic centers, to be engaged in research. Patients seek the answers to their questions from professionals who are knowledgeable in their fields. In the past, this knowledge was only obtained on a visit to the physician, and depending upon the patient's access to care, the important answers to any questions were sporadic at best. In many areas, conversation with a physician is still the only access that a patient has to medical information, requiring the health care professional to be accurate and knowledgeable.

Over time, as the pursuit of healthy lifestyles and the patient hunger for knowledge increased, print material in the lay population led to a greater hunger for information about disease processes ranging from ailments as routine as hypertension to those as physically and emotionally traumatic as cancer. It was not (and is not) uncommon for patients to arrive at the physician's office with clippings of articles they have read. In the era of pharmaceutical companies advertising to the lay community both in print and on television, patients often present to their physicians with ideas of a medication that will help them, even when there is no indication for the patient to take the medication they seek. Again, the physician

plays an important role in the dissemination of accurate information to the patient.

We have now moved into the Internet era. The Internet has provided a source for patients to find a plethora of information. The difficulty that we as physicians face is when patients present with misinformation. How can we as physicians develop an Internet presence to play a role in the delivery of information to our patients? A realm has been created in which we as physicians are able to disseminate information to patients-social media. Social media is defined as an area of online media where people share information over the internet. Modes of sharing include talking and networking.¹ Social media allows for conversation as opposed to traditional media where the delivery of information is one sided.¹ Two of the most popular social media sites currently in use by physicians and patients alike are Twitter and Facebook.

The concept of Twitter is an interesting one. Twitter, which operates out of San Francisco, California, USA, "went live" in 2006 and currently has over 200 million users.^{1,2} Users are identified by "@user", a unique identity. Users communicate on Twitter with tweets, brief communications which are limited to 140 characters including words and spaces.² Use of the Twitter service includes all walks of life and includes political candidates and elected officials, celebrities, and professional athletes. Professional societies have created accounts

with Twitter as an alternative method to reach their membership. Many institutions of higher learning have developed Twitter accounts, and one medical school in the United States has incorporated Twitter use into its curriculum.¹

Are physicians in practice using Twitter? The answer is a resounding yes. In fact, some health care professionals believe that if you're not using Twitter (many more patients are connected to the site than physicians), then you run the risk of losing patients to physicians who actively engage with other users on the service.³ Twitter has given patients the ability to have conversations with physicians simply by posting a series of tweets, allowing for near instant access and an informed party to answer questions. An important feature of Twitter is the ability to private message. If two users wish to send messages that only they can see, they must be following each other, and then the users can initiate a series of private messages between each other. This can be tremendously useful for patients who would like to speak more confidentially about an issue. Twitter has also been used to hold chats involving topics in health care and social media. As we look toward the future, it is difficult to believe that social networking sites such as Twitter will not play a crucial role in the education of our patients.

For all the good that Twitter can provide, there are also risks involved in its use, and physicians must be aware of these. Issues in the use of social media include patient consent, employment practice, physician credentialing and licensure, and patient physician relationship amongst others.⁴ It is important for physicians who engage in the use of Twitter (and other forms of social media), to not violate patients rights to confidentiality and privacy. Some state boards have taken this very seriously; in fact, one medical board in the United States revoked the license of a physician who shared patient information on Twitter, and while she did not reveal personal information about the patient, it was believed that sufficient information was posted for members of the patient's

community to recognize who the patient was.⁴ The American Medical Association has taken it one step further by developing a "Professionalism in the Use of Social Media" policy in which it gives guidance to physicians who wish to disseminate information to patients using social media platforms such as Twitter.⁴

Ultimately, the benefits of a physician presence on Twitter outweigh the risks. The ability to reach a large patient pool and disseminate important, credible information is paramount as we have entered an era which is driven by technological innovation. As the leaders of our profession, we need to evolve to use these services. Social media tools such as Twitter allow health care professionals to interact not only with current patients, but also with patients considering their practices. Physicians who do not move toward social media may unfortunately be left behind in this ever changing landscape.

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