



The Use of Social Media In Cardiovascular Medicine

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Social Media utilization and online social networking is booming. Nearly 83 % of all Fortune 500 companies are active on Twitter and nearly 420K C-level executives engage on social media channels daily¹. For decades, cardiovascular professionals have led the way for innovation and research in healthcare and social media use and engagement should be no exception.

Our Patients Are Active in Cyberspace and That is Where They Need Us to Be...

Patients and physicians have the opportunity to engage online like never before—nearly 87 % of all American adults use the internet on a daily basis. The growing number of mobile devices and tools that are available to consumers today facilitates this widespread internet use. According to a research poll conducted by Pew², nearly 65 % of all Americans own a smartphone and almost 90 % own a mobile device of some type. Most users engage online daily and the internet has become a major source of information for patients. The widespread use of online resources by patients has created the concept of the “electronic patient” or e-patient. The e-patient is a healthcare consumer who is fully invested in their care—they consider themselves an equal partner with their physician in the management of their disease. They are well informed and use online resources on a regular basis. Electronic patients are changing the landscape of medical care. According to Pew, 60 % of all e-patients consume social media and nearly 30 % contribute content.

Internet use is not limited to the millennial generation—71 % of all seniors go online every single day and more than half of these seniors go online in order to access health information³. Moreover, nearly 75 % of all patients visit the internet either immediately before or immediately after a visit to their healthcare provider in order to either seek advice or gather information to better understand a new diagnosis or treatment. Much of this online interaction is now occurring via mobile devices—enabling healthcare consumers to access information instantly, even while on the go. Social media facilitates instant communication and two-way interaction between healthcare professionals and patients. This ease of access and the opportunity for real-time dialogue and information exchange provides an enormous opportunity to impact the cardiovascular health of millions of Americans.

How Can Cardiovascular Professionals Use Social Media to Transform Care and Improve Outcomes?

Cardiovascular disease is the number one killer of Americans today. As a society we must do more to educate the public and increase awareness of the risk factors for cardiovascular disease. As healthcare providers we have a responsibility to work to prevent disease and modify risk factors within the populations whom we serve. Social Media can be an effective platform to promote wellness and positive lifestyle changes as well as a better way to interact with colleagues as well as patients in order to positively affect outcome.

A systemic review of over 98 publications concerning the use of social media in medicine was conducted in 2013 and found that there were six significant benefits when social media was used in medicine:⁴

- Increased meaningful interactions with colleagues
- More available, tailored, and shared information
- Increased accessibility and widening access to health information
- Increased peer/emotional/social support
- Public health surveillance
- Potential to influence healthcare policy

I believe that each of these findings is certainly relevant and easily applicable to the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease. By increasing our opportunities for meaningful interactions with colleagues, we are more likely to share ideas and innovate. Innovations will provide better treatments and will have the potential to reduce morbidity and mortality related to cardiovascular disease worldwide. Clinical trials can be promoted via social media and potential subjects can be recruited via online platforms. Social media engagement can promote collaborations in research as well as in patient care, ultimately improving outcomes. Providing wider access to health information allows patients all over the world to learn more about their risk for heart disease and may very well motivate them to make necessary lifestyle changes such as smoking cessation, weight loss and increasing physical activity. Given that the majority of Americans now have access to the internet, online depositories of information have the potential to impact millions of people with a wide range of medical problems. Even patients who live

in relatively rural areas have the opportunity to learn and engage from an online platform rather than remain isolated from major medical innovations. Social media promotes camaraderie because patients have common, shared experiences. Patients with cardiovascular disease often struggle with the day-to-day challenges of living with a chronic disease and many feel lonely and isolated—often depressed and hopeless. Social media can provide patients with much needed support and the virtual peer-to-peer interaction may very well improve compliance and reduce disease related emotional stress and depression. Given that cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in the US today, social media can be a great way to track disease and identify patterns in order to better focus on prevention. In addition, social media can help report outbreaks of disease and can assist government officials in disseminating important information during a health crisis.

Primarily for medical professionals, social media provides a platform where physicians can work to influence public opinion and potentially lawmakers for policy change. Blogs—short essays of between 750 and 1000 words that are posted online—offer cardiovascular healthcare providers the opportunity to advocate for patients, discuss healthcare policy, and spur debate among legislators and other political leaders. These discussions can be the vehicle by which changes are made that improve healthcare and outcomes for all patients. In addition, physician involvement in online platforms serves to develop one's reputation as a key opinion leader in a particular discipline or area of expertise.

However, even the most innovative and respected senior physicians have been slow to adapt social media for professional use. This is not the case with emerging healthcare professionals—the newer generation of physicians has been quick to adopt mobile technology and is making great progress in social media use. Data obtained from a survey in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* in 2011 shows that while there is far less engagement online by older physicians, there is significant use of social media by fellows, residents and medical students⁵. Nearly 95 % of emerging physicians report daily social media engagement—this is worth noting as these medical professionals will be the physician leaders of tomorrow and will likely set the standard for physician practices on social media platforms.

Social Media Provides Physicians With an Opportunity for Real Impact—Right Now

Patients trust their doctors, due in large part to the development of a meaningful doctor-patient relationship, but also due to a physician's

excellent care, years of training, and reputation as an expert. Trust between doctor and patient is critical—each holds one another accountable and both are engaged in the patient's treatment plan and invested in the patient's outcome. This important patient trust also extends to cyberspace.

A recent survey carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers demonstrated that most healthcare consumers are much more likely to trust online information provided by physicians as compared to hospitals, insurers, or drug companies.⁶ The online credibility of physicians offers a powerful opportunity to educate and influence. Physicians have an obligation to engage patients and colleagues in an online environment. In order to maximize the potential of social media in medicine we must improve cardiovascular outcomes. In order to successfully develop an online presence, it is important to understand how to master the meaningful use of social media in cardiovascular care:

- To treat—engaging directly with patients about a particular disease process, treatment options, and cardiovascular care. The information should be provided generally and not specific to a particular patient. Avoid engaging in an online doctor-patient relationship.
- To teach—provide timely and credible information and disease-specific education to patients as well as colleagues.
- To consult—share medical information and disease-specific knowledge with colleagues around the world. Develop a network to engage with colleagues and discuss best practices.
- To market—share your expertise and abilities with the world. Highlight your skill set and those of your colleagues.
- Become a key opinion leader—establish a national/international reputation. Become a thought leader and influence policy and practice guidelines.

Social media use by patients for health care and disease management is at an all-time high. The numbers of electronic patients continues to grow. While physicians have been slow to wade in to the waters of cyberspace, we are beginning to see more provider engagement. It is clear that the physicians of tomorrow will be fluent with multiple social media channels and it is apparent that older healthcare providers must begin to embrace change and engage with patients in cyberspace in order to meet the healthcare needs of a new tech savvy population. The time to get involved is now. Remember, cyberspace is where our patients are now and where we need to be. ■

1. Source: Twitter.com, MediaBistro October–December 2013
2. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/us-smartphone-use-in-2015/>
3. Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project
4. Moorhead SA, Hazlett DE, Harrison L, et al. A new dimension

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5. Bosslet GT, Torke AM, Hickman SE, et al. The patient-doctor

relationship and online social networks: results of a national survey. *J Gen Intern Med* 2011 Oct;26:1168–74. Epub 2011 Jun 25. doi: 10.1007/s11606-011-1761-2. PMID: 21706268 PMCID: PMC3181288.
6. Source: PwC HRI Social Media Consumer Survey, 2012