

#ClinMed: What have social media got to do with medicine?

Andrew McCracken

It is a Monday afternoon and Archi Shrimpton (Twitter user-name @arrchee) is worried about his sore thumb; worried to the point that he ‘Tweets’ to NHS Direct (@nhsdirect) to ask their advice:

‘Thumbs still not good a week after injuring at judo-slightly different shape, hurts when applying pressure-GP or Minor Injuries? @nhsdirect’

11 minutes later, @NHSdirect reply:

‘@arrchee Check your symptoms here Archie - [https://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/CheckSymptoms/...](https://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/CheckSymptoms/)’

It’s a very brief and very quick interaction, but an example of how social media can be utilised for healthcare.

Recent figures show that Twitter has 140 million active users worldwide, Facebook has shot past 900 million users, and one hour of video is uploaded to You Tube every second. Journalists, MPs, policy-makers, footballers, celebrities; everyone, it seems, is using social media.

The statistics are impressive, but more interesting is the public’s use of these platforms for health-related matters.

What have social media got to do with medicine?

According to a study of 1,060 US adults conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers, 45% of respondents claimed that information gathered from social media would affect their decision to seek a second medical opinion.¹ In the same study, 42% of respondents reported that information found via social media would affect the way they coped with a chronic condition and over 40% of respondents said that information found via social media is likely to influence their approach to diet, exercise or stress management.

Social media centres on the immediate two-way exchange of information amongst communities. But how can physicians use these platforms to improve healthcare? Networks like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn can be used to instantly debate issues, discover news, analyse research, network with peers, promote areas of work, crowd-source information, seek support, provide advice, or all of the above and more.

Where to start

If you are new to Twitter, a visit to the Healthcare Hashtag Project² is a good place to start (www.symplur.com/healthcare-hashtags). The project aims to simplify twitter for the healthcare

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community. The site maintains a list of health-related hashtags which are used on Twitter to categorise Tweets and help users follow particular topics or events. Examples of recent health-related hashtags include: #NHSSM, to discuss ideas of how social media can be used in the NHS; #NHSreform, to discuss implementation of the Health and Social Care Act; and #MedEd, to discuss medical education.

If you are interested in the potential of YouTube, there are a number of examples of viral videos which have proven to be a cost-effective way for NHS organisations to disseminate public health messages. North Bristol NHS Trust’s ‘Hot drinks do harm’ video has spread awareness of the huge number of children who are injured by hot drinks every year.³ NHS Leicester City’s more shocking video on teenage pregnancy has been viewed nearly 1.2 million times⁴ and generated considerable interest in the mainstream media.

Facebook has also been put to good use by organisations such as NHS Blood Donation, whose page has attracted over 150,000 fans. Users receive regular updates on events and campaigns, and can ask questions about blood donation as well as find the address of their nearest blood centre.

The purpose-built online community set up by the St Radboud Academic Medical Center in the Netherlands is an example of the potential for creating new social networks. The site is specifically designed for young cancer patients to meet other sufferers and discuss their health problems, financial troubles, issues at work or any other topic they care to talk about.

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is also active on social media. Followers of the RCP’s Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube or Flickr pages (Box 1) receive regular news and information from the RCP and related organisations.

Join the debate

At its heart, social media is about the immediate dissemination of information, the building of community and the debate and analysis of issues. Is austerity a failed experiment on the

Box 1. Social media at the RCP.

Twitter. The RCP @RCPLondon. twitter.com/RCPLondon

Facebook. Royal College of Physicians of London. www.facebook.com/RoyalCollegeofPhysicians

LinkedIn. Royal College of Physicians of London. www.linkedin.com/company/royal-college-of-physicians

YouTube. Royal College of Physicians of London. www.youtube.com/Rcponline

Flickr. Royal College of Physicians. www.flickr.com/photos/rcplondon

European population, as Martin McKee argues?⁵ What do you think about the role of the generalist having read Linda Patterson and Varo Kirthi's article?⁶ Do you believe social media has a role to play in improving healthcare?

Join the debate by logging-on to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, or any of the social networks. Hashtag: '#ClinMed'.

References

- 1 PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP. *PwC HRI social media consumer survey*. Delaware: PwC HRI, 2012.
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- 5 McKee M, Karanikolos M, Belcher P, Stuckler D. Austerity: a failed experiment on the people of Europe. *Clin Med* 2012;12:346–50.
- 6 Kirthi V, Temple RM, Patterson LJ. Inpatient care: should the general physician now take charge? *Clin Med* 2012;12:316–19.

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