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Social media supremacy: a force of change paving the way for the next generation of healthcare and research.

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EBN engages readers through a range of online social media activities to debate issues important to nurses and nursing. EBN Opinion papers highlight and expand on these debates.

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This month's opinion draws on an EBN Twitter chat that focused on using social media in healthcare. Access the blog at: http://blogs.bmj.com/ebn/ and the Storify at: http://storify.com/SimonRStones/healthcare-2-0.

Background

Social media is an interactive communication platform that enables conversations amongst individuals. The presence and use of social media has grown exponentially in the last decade, revolutionising the way in which we communicate with each other. The phrase social media is often used interchangeably to describe popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. With a generation of millennials who are likely to seek initial medical advice from the internet, the healthcare community must embrace social media and its relevance to modern society. Considering over 40% of people are influenced by health-related material found on social media,[1,2] the healthcare community, including patient organisations, must ensure that accessible, evidence-based information is freely available through social media to attenuate potentially misleading or inaccurate information.

Key messages from the Twitter Chat (#ebnjc)

Although a range of issues were discussed during Twitter chat; three key themes emerged. The first related to the multitude of benefits that social media can bring to the healthcare community. Participants agreed that social media enables individuals and organisations to connect and network with a diverse community of people, enabling debate, collaboration, rapid feedback to thoughts and concerns, and an important means of peer support. Where health professionals (HCPs) engaged in patient-professional social media activities, it was perceived there was greater understanding of the experiences and needs of people living with health conditions. Similarly, patients felt that social media can breakdown the patient-professional barrier that remains within healthcare (Figure 1). Since online communication can often feel less intimidating than face-to-face settings, social media

can empower individuals to develop a variety of skills useful to daily life, and practice, by making communication more accessible. In addition, social media was identified as a useful health education and awareness tool, facilitating individual access to healthcare evidence and advice (Figure 2). Given that millennials and Generation Z, in particular, are using social media for information, a number of HCPs perceived they had a role in ensuring that information on social media is evidence-based, since the likelihood of fictitious and anecdotal material posted on social media is inevitable. Furthermore, social media was highlighted as a powerful mechanism to prioritise, conduct, and disseminate research to different communities. When used appropriately, social media can help with the translational of research processes and findings from theory into practice.

Figure 1. Social media is a neutral platform for individuals with different experiences to come together

Figure 2. Healthcare professionals should support patients who use social media for health information

The second theme related to the challenges of using social media, such as the length of time to become familiar with social networking sites. Many participants shared their personal experiences, and how they initially 'lurked' on social media, particularly during tweet chats, until they felt comfortable in using platforms. The perception of social media from those who have refrained from using it can often be negative; hence it was felt that people need to witness first-hand the value of social media in order to fully comprehend its usefulness. Proficient users were reminded to appreciate and respect those who are still developing their social media skills.

Participants disliked social media accounts used only to highlight products as opposed to engaging in dialogue with followers. Trust was identified as a characteristic underpinning successful social networking sites, which enable individuals to relate to other people, organisations and initiatives. A number of concerns were raised regarding institutional policies of social media use among employees, particularly those employed by the National Health Service (NHS) and academic institutions. From an organisational perspective, social media may be monitored, which intuitively is the antithesis to the ultimate function of social media. Pragmatically, participants advised that organisations develop robust but supportive social media strategies that comply to professional guidance. There were some concerns around privacy when patients and HCPs followed each other on social media, with a potential blurring of professional boundaries, and managing criticism and trolls. Participants expressed concerns when dealing with crisis events and when patients contact HCPs on social media for medical advice outside professional groups. It was recognised that responses can often be taken out of context and misinterpreted on social media, and individuals voiced the need for more support and training in helping them to better deal with criticism and trolling on social media. Finally, individuals stated that social media can become addictive; therefore, good time management is required to balance engagement with social media with other activities.

The third and final theme related to balancing professionalism and authenticity on social media, particularly for those in trusted healthcare positions. In general, most individuals highlighted that revealing their own personality on social media could facilitate being perceived as an approachable and empathetic individual. Non-HCPs felt that genuine and authentic HCPs engendered a reduction in power relationships that may sub-consciously exist between HCPs and patients. Ultimately, social media users can be both human and professional by staying respectable online and maintaining the same boundaries that would exist in person. However, everyone should be mindful of what should and should not be shared in an open forum. There were mixed views about how and when professional and personal social media portrayals should intersect, if at all. Some people prefer to keep professional and personal social media accounts completely separate, particularly those from healthcare settings, who emphasised the need for dual identities with different boundaries. A thought-provoking issue was also raised over HCP fear and anxiety of using social media if they are on annual leave or sick leave, and the consequences this could potentially have on their working lives if employers scrutinised their online activities.

Conclusions

Social media has transformed the way in which people interact, and has become a core method for the healthcare community to network, learn and develop their skills and identity. The tweet chat highlighted the importance of having a digital strategy to get the most out of social media, particularly from an organisational perspective. However, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly treated as isolated components, rather than as part of an integrated system.[3] In addition, 'social media should not be seen primarily as the platforms upon which people post, but rather as the contents that are posted on these platforms' (pg x).[4] Social networking sites such as Twitter, enable you to reach over 270 million active people each month.[5] The conversation on social networking sites is happening with or without you.[5] By embracing and utilising social media, it is more likely that you will increase your opportunities to engage people who share your passions. A useful way to develop your social media confidence is by participating in tweet chats and engaging in social media conversations at conferences. However, it is recognised that those unfamiliar with social media may be sceptical about its purpose and use. For HCPs who are uncertain about using social media, online documents, such as the Nursing & Midwifery Council's Guidance on using social media responsibly, are invaluable.[6] In addition, a range of other platforms can enhance the social media experience, such as Storify, a social network service that enables users to create stories or timelines using social media posts from several social networking sites (http://storify.com).

Social media clearly has an untapped potential in modern healthcare; however, that potential remains largely undefined in healthcare systems such as the NHS. A recent editorial published in the Journal of Family Nursing called for further research to be conducted to better understand how social networking sites can be used as a tool for healthcare research and as a way to supplement professional healthcare by providing support and information to patients, families and the general public.[7] Whether you love it or loathe it, social media is here to stay. In the coming years, social media is likely to transform many aspects of our lives, including healthcare. In the meantime, it remains the responsibility of the healthcare community to ensure that current and future generations of social media users are educated to use social media appropriately, including supporting them to distinguish between evidence-based and anecdotal information, which will become increasingly difficult to do as the popularity of social media expands beyond our wildest dreams.

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