

How Medical Doctors and Students Should Use Social Media: a Review of the Main Guidelines for Proposing Practical Recommendations

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Abstract. Social Media has grown exponentially and in the last few years there has been an increasing use amongst medical doctors and students. There is intense debate about the complexities of ensuring medical professionalism in the digital age and especially on using open and massive online services. The objectives of this paper are: first, to gather the main recommendations on using Social Media platforms and websites by medical doctors and students, which are proposed by several international organizations, institutions and universities of reference and second, to propose a set of practical recommendations, based on the comparison of the statements and items of the guidelines, in order to find agreements and differences among them and select the most common and practical items stated. A Decalogue of good practices has been drawn up, pointing out the most important aspects that should be considered, highlighting the relevance of maintaining professional behavior in these environments, taking into account the advantages and drawbacks when using them.

Keywords. Social media, practice guideline, physicians, medical students, codes of ethics

Introduction

Social media (SM) may be defined as web-based and mobile services that allow people to share a connection, monitoring, creating or manipulating text, audio, photos or video, with others [1, 2]. In recent years social media or social networking has grown exponentially, and the use of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube, among many others, is increasing amongst medical doctors and students with different purposes, as much for personal as professional use [3, 4], although there is no precise information on how physicians are using these tools. Also, Internet forums and blogs,

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such as typical Web 2.0 tools, are usual sources of medical information and participation. The public display of connections with other users is a major component of these services. At the same time there is intense debate about the complexities of ensuring medical professionalism and privacy issues in the digital age and there is little consensus among doctors on how interactions on these networks should be managed [5-7]. Social media has various advantages, such as reaching an extensive audience, low cost, prompt communication and easy updating, but there are risks in relation with misinformation and maintaining patient privacy. Different studies suggest that unprofessional uses of SM are not uncommon [8-10]. Although this kind of services has not been widely adopted, it seems it is the time to promote a wide reflection and consider the ethical and policy issues that may affect the current and future doctor-patient relationship [11, 12]. The World Medical Association (WMA) adopted a statement on the professional and ethical use of SM in its last general assembly in October 2011, urging national medical associations to establish guidelines for their physicians addressing different issues related to SM [13]. The objectives of this work are: to provide an approach to the main recommendations for guiding medical doctors and students in the use of social networks and, to propose a set of relevant aspects that should be considered and may be useful for medical doctors and students, for assuring professional behavior when using Social Media platforms and websites. This review expands and substantially updates a first approach that we carried out [14].

1. Methods

First of all a search strategy was set up using Scholar Google and Google.com, as the most popular search engine, in order to find websites, articles, conferences or technical reports related to specific guidelines and recommendations about how to use Social Media by medical doctors and students from a professional point of view. The selection criterion was to include recommendations or guidelines on using Social Media that were produced by medical organizations, institutions or universities and health companies. The following search query was used in both search engines the 15th of December 2011: ("social media" OR "social networks" OR "social networking") AND ("medical doctors" OR "medical students" OR "medical profession" OR physicians) AND (guidelines OR recommendations OR policy OR ethics OR professionalism OR guide) although in Google it is not necessary to include the "AND" explicitly. The first 250 results in Google search engine were checked. After that point the following thirty links contained duplicated information. Likewise, the first 100 references displayed in Scholar Google were reviewed to find articles related to the topic of study. The statements of the guidelines found were compared in order to find agreements and differences among them in content, selecting those more relevant (i.e. about privacy, confidentiality or ethics) and the most frequently mentioned. Based on that, the reviewers' reached a consensus on the elaboration of a set of ten recommendations to be included in the Decalogue. In addition, variables such as organization name, target, domain, country and date were considered.

2. Results

A total number of 26 guidelines and recommendations were found and reviewed. Different medical professional organizations, companies and universities created and proposed some recommendations to guide doctors and medical students in using social media, such as the American Medical Association (AMA), the British Medical Association (BMA), etc. 20% were addressed to both medical doctors and students, in addition the majority (60%) of guidelines reviewed were addressed to employees of a specific company and the remaining 40% had a general professional purpose. Practically all guidelines were stated in 2011. The details in describing the rules to follow vary a lot, from short writings (e.g. AMA) to those which included long explanations and examples of concrete problems (e.g. BMA) using social media. Different levels of participation restrictions in social networks were expressed, from those that were promoting its use to those that focused on all the problems related to them. The majority of the guidelines were produced by organizations from the United States of America, the rest were from different countries such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Spain. Table 1 shows a complete list of the guidelines reviewed. A website was created with all the links to the recommendations listed [15].

Table 1. Recommendations about the use of Social Media ^a

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1. Alliance for Academic Internal Medicine
 2. American Medical Association Policy in the use of Social Media
 3. Australian Medical Association Council and the New Zealand Medical Association
 4. Avvo: Being influential Online: Social Media tactics for Physicians
 5. British Medical Association: Using social media
 6. Canadian Medical Association: Social Media and Online Networking Forums
 7. Cleveland Clinic: Social Media Policy
 8. Florida Academy of Family Physicians Social Media Policy
 9. Health Science Centre Guidelines for appropriate use of Internet and social media
 10. Indiana University. Guidelines for use of Online social networks for medical students
 11. Iowa Hospital Association: Comment Policy
 12. Kaiser Permanente: Social Media Policy
 13. Massachusetts Medical Society: Physicians and Social Media
 14. Mayo Clinic: Comment Policy Blogs
 15. Ohio State Medical Association: Social Networking
 16. Open Access social media guidelines for pharma (Webicina.com)
 17. Política de Redes sociales del Hospital Sant Joan de Déu
 18. Roche Social Media Principles
 19. Sentara: Social Media Policy
 20. Sutter Health: Policy for Social Networking
 21. Symplur, LLC: Healthcare Social Media Policy for Physicians and Staff
 22. The College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia: Social Media and Forums
 23. University of Minnesota Physicians: Terms of Use- Social Media
 24. Vertex Pharmaceuticals: Twitter Guidelines
 25. Wisconsin Department of Health Services Social Media Guidelines
 26. World Medical Association Statement on the Professional & Ethical use of Social Media
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^a In alphabetical order

3. Discussion

In the last two years several organizations have drawn up different recommendations trying to answer many questions surrounding social media and medical doctors. Although the use of SM for health purposes is facing different unsolved questions,

following the standards of quality and ethical issues in the medical profession, its application is giving us a slight idea of the benefits in health care. On the other hand, it seems that the consequences (as much positive as negative) of giving opinions and sharing information in Social Media (e.g. blogs, Facebook, Twitter) about different kind of health topics, which can be directly related to physicians' work, may affect the doctor-patient relationship and the company or institution where medical doctors are working. For example, imagine the situation where a medical doctor had voiced serious personal doubts about the use and safety of vaccines on his/her blog while at the same time scheduling them in his/her health care setting. How could this situation affect his/her patient-relationships and with the institution where he/she works?

Finally, there is a general consensus about the key role that medical doctors have in social networking and second, it is very important to take into account the potential positive and negative consequences of using Social Media (professional, personal and in medical profession), this depends on the behaviour of the medical doctors and students in these environments and different ethical and professional issues should be considered. In general, SM is seen as a great opportunity as a means to complement health activities and doctor-patient relationship but more experience is needed to find the right place to use it although surely that will change eventually. It is not an easy task to separate personal and professional boundaries but it is very important to be transparent and to establish clearly the objectives and use of the services when engaged in SM as a professional. But many questions remain under discussion, for instance, how to manage the digital identity and where the limits between personal and professional presence online are or how to give answers to open ethical and legal concerns related to potential doctor-patient relationships established online.

The limitations of this study reside in the fact that, new SM services and recommendations may appear in the next months, which will require an update. At the same time, it is possible that using other less popular search engines, guidelines not included in this study, could be found. In addition, some recommendations could not be applied in particular organizations or countries, with specific legal or ethical regulations on using Internet and SM for health purposes. Finally, the number and importance of the items included in the Decalogue by the authors of the study, could be different if they were considered by other reviewers.

3.1. Decalogue of practical recommendations on using Social Media

Although it is basic to foster more debate and research on using SM and their effects in health care, as much positive as negative, based on the review of the different guidelines and documents analyzed, ten points of general practices when using social networking websites are proposed:

- The use of Social Media for professional purposes opens new ways to communicate with patients, general public and colleagues but it is necessary to consider different aspects to guarantee their safer, legal and ethical utilization.
- Use conservative privacy settings in SM platforms although be aware that not all information can be protected on the Web and how easily accessible it is.
- Maintain standards of patient privacy and confidentiality and be sure that any patient cannot be identified by the combination or sum of information posted online. Likewise, respect information and content copyrights.

- Remember that what is online is probably long-lasting so be careful about what you say and how you say it.
- It is not recommended to give any kind of medical advice in social networks. When using Social Media platforms for services such as general health information or education, explain clearly the objectives, features of usage and limitations. Also, remember to include in Electronic Health Records (EHR) any kind of interaction with your patients using SM.
- Medical doctors shouldn't be friends with everyone in Social Media and in general it is prudent not to become an electronic friend of a current or former patient (consider separate clearly personal and professional content online).
- Follow the guidelines of your health organization or company on using social media and if they are not established yet, seriously suggest its implementation as soon as possible, considering it as one more service.
- Clarify when you are speaking on behalf of your company or institution, if it is not the case, clearly state that you are making personal remarks.
- If you are identified as a medical doctor, any statement must especially reflect good standards of conduct and professional behavior.
- Any form of inappropriate online behavior can potentially harm doctor-patient or colleague relationships, be careful with comments made about colleagues and even health departments. Maintain good and respectful manners.

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