The Benefits and Challenges of Social Media for Docs

By Manish Kumar Chauhan [5]

Patients are more empowered than ever to access health information through social media. How can physicians benefit from this brave new landscape?

Source: Physicians Practice

The use of social media for health use is on the rise. The advent of digitalization has transformed the healthcare system to where patients can now gather information, explore options, and share their experiences. Empowered patients are increasingly taking an active role in researching health information online to get a better understanding of their health conditions or the treatments/medications.

One potential role of digital healthcare marketing is to create physician-patient communications that inform, influence, and motivate patients to make better health decisions to improve their quality of life. People have an unquenched thirst of knowledge about disease conditions, the latest treatment options available, preventive measures, drug therapy, and so on. Social media is the thread that can connect physicians and patients in this virtual world. Physicians are now increasingly becoming aware of this mode of communication and have started using it extensively to create value for their patients and potential patients by providing them accurate health information. But as with other tasks physicians deal with, educating patients through social media brings along a set of challenges and benefits.

**Some Benefits**

Patients can benefit from the use of social media through education, obtaining information, networking, performing research, receiving support, goal-setting, and tracking personal progress. Physicians can frequently post articles, messages, tips and blogs on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or in emails to promote health behaviors, motivate people to achieve their health goals, and increase awareness about general health conditions and disease prevention.

Providing scientifically accurate and quality health information on various social media channels will help increase your online visibility and create a sense of credibility. Moreover, this helps in establishing a sense of trust about your practice among patients and other readers who can be future patients. It enables physicians to connect with a number of people in the virtual world, which otherwise may not have been possible by sitting in office.

**Challenges for Physicians**

While embracing social media, the primary challenges for physicians are related to patient privacy and security of the social media programs. Under all circumstances, physicians must keep in mind HIPAA regulations and maintain confidentiality of patient information. While using social media can build up the physician-patient relationship, physicians should be mindful that this must not be at the cost of their professional commitments. They should adopt a conservative approach for disclosing personal information about any patient, as online channels are public and can be accessed by anyone.

While interacting with patients on the Internet, physicians must maintain appropriate boundaries of the patient-physician relationship in accordance with professional ethical guidelines, just as they would in any other context. To have clear personal and professional boundaries, physicians should consider developing professional profiles with an explicit purpose of networking and reaching out to patients. Physicians should maintain strict privacy settings on personal accounts and not “friend” or contact patients through personal social media.

Social media platforms have transformed healthcare and will continue to change the landscape of social networking for healthcare professionals. These channels can be positive drivers of professional growth only when they are used in the right way, i.e. ethically and responsibly.

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