Keeping a Finger on the Pulse of Social Media in Healthcare: Understanding Evolving Roles and Risks

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“Social media” is simply a broad umbrella term that covers a wide range of electronic communication tools, such as email, social networking websites, blogs, video sharing and conferencing tools, mobile applications, and more.

The growth and usage of social media continue to influence not only the American public, but the world at large. Recent research shows that more than 75 percent of online adults use social networking sites.\(^1\) With the rapid expansion of these technologies, one can assume that social media usage will continue to grow and become an even more prevalent form of communication.

In the past, healthcare was relatively slow to implement social media tools, primarily because of concerns regarding the potential risks of violating patient privacy. However, in more recent years, an increase in implementation has occurred — mainly due to consumer demand.

A Healthcare IT News article states that “It’s no secret that a growing percentage of today’s patients are increasingly using digital tools as part of their overall health maintenance. In fact, a recent Pew Research Center study said that 1 in 3 American adults have used the web to figure out a medical issue. In another survey . . . 41% of people said social media would affect their choice of healthcare provider.”\(^2\)

With this growing emphasis on electronic communication and the importance that patients place on it, healthcare providers might be eager to implement these technologies in their organizations and practices. However, leveraging social media for...
professional purposes can be a slippery slope, and its usage in healthcare presents various challenges.

This article discusses common risk concerns associated with using social media for healthcare communication and delivery, and it offers risk-reduction strategies that healthcare providers and their staffs can implement.

**What Are the Potential Benefits of Social Media?**

The use of social media can bring significant communication and educational benefits to both healthcare providers and consumers. Estimates suggest that 90 percent of physicians use some form of social media for personal activities, and 65 percent engage in social media for professional purposes.³

Many providers use social media to stay up to date with new information that may affect their practices and patient care. Further, social media is used as an online marketing tool to increase provider visibility and reputation, as well as enhance professional networking.

For consumers, social media can assist with searching for a new healthcare provider, keeping up with healthcare issues and concerns, finding support groups, researching alternative medications and side effects, and more.

**What Types of Social Media Tools Are Available?**

A myriad of social media applications and tools are available. Some common ones that are used for both personal and professional purposes include:

- **Email.** Email is a very commonly used and recognized form of social media, and it has become an increasingly viable communication option for healthcare providers and patients. Patients may use emails to ask questions, request medication refills, report symptoms, schedule appointments, and more.

- **Facebook.** With more than 1 billion active users per month, Facebook allows users to share information, pictures, and videos; follow individuals, organizations, and groups; converse via electronic messaging; and more. The site allows for both personal and professional pages.

- **LinkedIn.** LinkedIn focuses on professional relationships and includes job-related information, access to recruiters, professional networking opportunities, and career-related articles and topics.

- **Twitter.** Twitter is a microblogging site that promotes real-time sharing of information and up-to-the-minute news from individuals or organizations.

- **Skype and FaceTime.** Skype and FaceTime are both video-chatting technologies that allow users to interact in real-time over an Internet connection.
• **YouTube.** YouTube is a video-sharing site that allows users to upload, view, and share videos on a wide range of topics for both entertainment and educational purposes.

• **Patient portals.** Patient portals, which are a relatively new technology, allow patients to access their health records and communicate with their healthcare providers through a secure online website.

Deciding which applications and tools will be most helpful will largely depend on the context and needs of your practice. However, when determining how to use these technologies to communicate with patients, carefully consider the goal of the communication, the target audience, and what types of information you plan to promote (e.g., advertisements, health education, etc.).

**What Are the Risks of, and Strategies for, Using Social Media?**

Undoubtedly, social media offers various functions that may potentially enhance the dissemination of healthcare information and communication between patients and providers.

But what about the risks? Like any type of technology, social media can create safety and liability issues if it is not used responsibly. Additionally, because social media changes rapidly, standards and best practices are not always well-defined.

To address these challenges, healthcare providers should be aware of the potential risks associated with electronic communication, develop detailed social media policies, and implement risk strategies to safeguard their patients and practices.

**Maintain Privacy and Security**

One of the most significant concerns related to social media is the requirement to maintain strict confidentiality and safeguard patients’ protected health information (PHI). This obligation is addressed in federal law and governed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA). Individual states also may have laws related to privacy and security of PHI, which might be more stringent than federal laws.

Social media may make privacy violations more concerning than they might otherwise be because they distribute information instantaneously to a wide audience and because, unlike verbal conversations, use of social media creates a permanent electronic record that is likely discoverable in litigation.4

Because the boundaries between appropriate vs. inappropriate and personal vs. professional use of social media can easily blur, managing privacy risks can be challenging. For example, numerous instances have occurred in which healthcare
workers have posted pictures of, or details about, their patients on their professional or personal social media pages without patients’ consent. Regardless of whether these actions were intentional or inadvertent, they violated confidentiality and the patients’ privacy rights.5

A number of risk strategies can help practices address privacy concerns related to social media. For example:

- Do no post or publish any content on social media sites that contains patient details or identifying information (including photographs and testimonials), without the patient’s permission and written consent. The consent should explicitly state how the information will be used.
- Consider prohibiting the photographic use of cellphones and other mobile technologies as part of office policy.
- Have someone who is familiar with HIPAA and state privacy regulations review social media content to ensure information does not violate patient confidentiality.
- Train staff on HIPAA and state privacy laws, and educate them about the consequences of violating these regulations.
- Ask staff members to sign confidentiality agreements, and maintain a signed copy of the agreement in each employee’s personnel file.
- Be aware that responding to a patient post or review on a social media site might violate privacy laws.
- Understand the technical limitations and terms and conditions of any social media sites that you plan to use. For example, information sent via messaging functions is likely not encrypted, and the site may maintain the right to access any personal information.

Addressing privacy concerns in your practice’s social media policies and implementing strategic safeguards can help protect patients and reduce liability exposure.

Establish Appropriate Boundaries

Social media can create a new dynamic in provider–patient relationships, and it also can pose new challenges. In 2013, the American College of Physicians (ACP) and the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) released a position paper titled Online Medical Professionalism: Patient and Public Relationships: Policy Statement, which explained that “Use of online media can bring significant educational benefits to patients and physicians, but may also pose ethical challenges.”6

In speaking with HealthLeaders Media, Dr. Humayun Chaudhry, FSMB President and CEO, warned that “Anything physicians post on sites can be forwarded, taken out of context, and accessed and retrieved in perpetuity. That’s a fact that many physicians don’t always think about when they engage in social media.”7
Because social media is used for both personal and professional purposes, the boundaries between the two can sometimes become difficult to distinguish. However, healthcare providers can generally make two assumptions: (1) any of their staff members or patients could be using some type of social media, and (2) anyone could potentially read what they and/or their staff members post, as well as what anyone else writes about their practice or organization on social media sites.8

Because of these concerns about personal and professional boundaries, the ACP-FSMB paper advises providers to keep their personal and professional social media activities separate and to “comport themselves professionally in both.”9

For example, healthcare providers should not “friend” patients on Facebook or mix social relationships with their professional relationships. Instead, they should apply the same ethical principles that govern their traditional patient encounters to their online interactions with patients, including privacy and confidentiality standards.

Further, providers should be aware of the implications of offering online information that might be construed as medical or dental advice. Doing so could inadvertently trigger a duty to care, and it also may pose patient safety concerns. Because of this, electronic media should include standard disclaimers and disclosure language that explain the nature of the communication (e.g., for informational purposes only) and caution users against interpreting the materials as medical or dental advice.

**Develop Social Media Policies**

The development and implementation of social media policies and guidelines is essential to managing risks associated with these technologies. Include staff in the initial planning and drafting of policies, and ask them to help identify and assess potential issues. Key areas to consider when developing your practice’s social media policies include:

- The practice’s goals and target audience for social media communication
- Acceptable and unacceptable use of social media, with explicit examples
- Who is authorized to develop and post social media content on behalf of the practice
- The review and approval process for social media content
- Standard disclaimer and disclosure language
- The patient consent process
• Terms of use for users on your sites
• The process for reporting inappropriate use of social media

When developing these policies, keep in mind that social media is dynamic and constantly changing. To address this, create policies that are flexible and adaptable to new or changing social media technologies. Doing so will help avoid the need for constant updating.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Email Policies}

In addition to having policies for social networking websites (such as Facebook and Twitter), practices also should have written guidelines for the use of email and other types of electronic messaging.

The American Medical Association (AMA) realized years ago that email would be a valuable communication tool in healthcare. As such, they developed guidelines for the ethical use of email between doctors and patients. Although the guidelines note many beneficial aspects of email communication, they also outline four key precautions to help manage risks.

• Email should not be used to establish a doctor–patient relationship; rather, it should be used to supplement traditional patient encounters.
• The same ethical responsibilities that apply to in-person patient encounters also apply to email communication.
• Doctors should properly notify patients of the limitations of email communication, such as delays in response and potential security issues.
• Doctors should provide proper notification of email’s limitations prior to initiating email correspondence or in the initial email communication.\textsuperscript{11}

The American Dental Association (ADA) reiterated these concerns in a 2007 publication, noting that although email communication in the dental office can be very beneficial, it can also “raise significant considerations.” Like the AMA, the ADA cautions that patients should be notified about, and accept the risks of, communicating via email before such communication is used.\textsuperscript{12}

When developing an email consent form, healthcare organizations and practices may want to consider including the following types of information:

• Type of communication permitted (i.e., the purpose that email will serve for the practice)
• Criteria for establishing the patient relationship
• Notice of whether the office email is encrypted
• A statement notifying patients to contact 911 if they are experiencing an urgent problem
• The general turnaround time for responding to email
• The right of the healthcare provider to refuse to make conclusions or decisions regarding treatment based on information obtained online

The email consent form should also include (a) a statement that the patient has read and accepted the policy, and (b) a place for the patient’s signature. The practice should maintain the signed release in the patient’s record.

Control Quality and Monitor Your Online Presence

Part of maintaining a professional presence online is monitoring the quality of information posted or sent on behalf of your practice. Information should be accurate, current, objective, and nonambiguous. Policies that establish who is responsible for developing content and how content is reviewed and approved will assist with quality control efforts.

Depending on the type of social media being used and/or the control settings, site users might be able to post content or comments to your practice’s social media pages. Understanding the types of media your practice is using and how users can potentially interface with it are important aspects of quality control.

As part of social media policies, medical and dental practices should include a mechanism for monitoring their online presence and managing negative, offensive, or inaccurate information. To ensure consistency with organizational policy, practices might want to consider assigning one person to review external comments, posts, responses, etc., and handle them accordingly. Keep in mind that comments and responses from practice staff must comply with privacy standards.

Educate Staff

When integrating social media into your practice’s communication initiatives, it is important to educate staff about how much and what types of personal and professional social media usage and tools are acceptable in the practice.

A survey found that 75 percent of employees were accessing their personal social media sites from their mobile devices at least once a day and 60 percent were accessing these sites multiple times throughout the day.

A significant challenge in the office practice setting is instilling common sense and discretion regarding the use of social media for both personal and professional purposes. Practice policy should define appropriate use of the Internet and mobile devices (such as tablets and cellphones). For example, the policy might require that employees turn off their personal phones during office hours and retrieve and respond to their messages during breaks or at lunch time.

Education about the practice’s social media policies, as well as discussions about the potential risks and liability issues associated with social media, should be included as
part of orientation training and ongoing staff education. Staff members also should be aware of the disciplinary actions for violating the social media policy.

**Conclusion**

In the years ahead, as the role of social media continues to evolve, it will be essential for healthcare practices to ensure a safe and effective environment for patients, staff, and providers to communicate electronically.

Given the number of options available for electronic communication and networking, careful consideration must be given to choosing the appropriate format that meets the needs of your practice and patient population.

Further, maintaining privacy and confidentiality, establishing appropriate boundaries, developing written policies, monitoring online presence, and educating staff should always remain in the forefront of utilizing social media in healthcare.

**RESOURCE**

For a helpful tool, download MedPro Group’s social media checklist for healthcare practices.
Endnotes


4 ECRI Institute, Social media in healthcare.

5 Ibid.


9 Farnan, et al., Online medical professionalism.


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