

Innovative patient care practices using social media

T. Joseph Mattingly II

Abstract

Objective: To characterize the literature on social media applications used to deliver patient care.

Data Sources: A search of the literature was conducted on June 11, 2014, using PubMed, MEDLINE, CINAHL, and Communication Abstracts databases for clinical studies between 2004 and 2014. A combination of the search terms “social media” or “Web 2.0” or “online social networking” or “Facebook” or “Twitter” AND “patient care” or “health care” was used. In addition, 42 additional abstracts were retrieved from www.patientslikeme.com for review.

Study selection: Only published, peer-reviewed journal articles were considered and only publications in English were included. The abstracts from this search were reviewed for relevance to Web-based social media platforms being used in patient care activities.

Data synthesis: A total of 35 articles were included in the review. A majority of the studies published on social media and patient care used cross-sectional designs and were conducted in the United States. Multiple social media applications were studied, but Facebook was the predominant social media tool found. Patient care opportunities for various diseases with social media have been studied. Recurring themes included overcoming barriers, engaging and empowering patients, enhancing research, providing information for health promotion, scratching the surface, and potential pitfalls.

Conclusion: Social media have the potential to help patients and practitioners overcome multiple barriers in the delivery of health care. Maintaining patient privacy, security of information shared in the platform, and integrity of information shared are all concerns when using this type of Web application.

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The use of social media by health professionals to deliver patient care has garnered much debate over the past few years since the creation and viral expansion of multiple online social media sites. The term “social media” was derived from the evolution of Web 2.0 applications that are inherently open and social in nature and integrate user-added value into traditional Web platforms.¹

Multiple organizations have implemented policies and recommendations for appropriate social media use by members over the past few years.^{2,3} Most recently, the House of Delegates of the American Pharmacists Association (APhA) approved official policy regarding the use of social media during the 2014 Annual Meeting and Exposition in Orlando, Florida.⁴ Delegates to the APhA House debated many issues related to social media including the role of social media in the delivery of patient care.

References to social media during discussions typically entice images of the most common sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+). But social media encompass a much wider range of tools that allow users to post information and make it available to a large audience. The networking component of social media explains the interactions between the users and the engagement that follows. While these websites are widely

accepted for social and networking purposes, their use among health professionals and in the delivery of patient care is controversial. Issues and concerns with social media regarding potential pitfalls for pharmacists have been well documented.⁵⁻⁷ This narrow focus of grouping all social networking sites with the most commonly used may prevent practitioners from exploring other websites built on interactive Web platforms, such as PatientsLikeMe, that may not have the same privacy or security concerns. Limited understanding of social media as well as examples of improper use may blunt innovation involving interactive applications in ways that might enhance clinical outcomes.

This review aims to add to the discussion by examining current published examples of social media applications being used in health care settings to deliver patient care.

Methods

A search of the literature was conducted on June 11, 2014, using PubMed, MEDLINE, CINAHL, and Communication Abstracts databases for clinical studies between 2004 and 2014. A combination of the search terms “social media” or “Web 2.0” or “online social networking” or “Facebook” or “Twitter” AND “patient care” or “health care” was used. In addition to the database search, 42 additional abstracts were retrieved from PatientsLikeMe (www.patientslikeme.com) for review.

Only published, peer-reviewed journal articles were considered, and only publications in English were included. The abstracts were screened by the author for relevance to Web-based social media platforms being used in patient care activities. Studies that were not specific to social media and addressed traditional Web applications lacking the interactive features typically seen in Web 2.0 were excluded. In addition, studies of non-patient care activities of health professionals (e.g., teaching, organizational use of social media) were not included in the final review. After the final review, any emerging themes were evaluated qualitatively by the author.

Study selection

The initial search of the databases and PatientsLikeMe yielded 2,259 abstracts for screening. Abstract screening resulted in 42 full-text articles to be assessed for eligibility. During assessment, seven articles were excluded from the review based on multiple factors as identified in the PRISMA statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; <http://www.prisma-statement.org>; Figure 1).

After completing the identification, screening, and eligibility process, 35 relevant peer-reviewed journal publications were included in this analysis.⁸⁻⁴² For all included articles, data on the following items were collected: authors, year published, country, topic area, study

Key Points

Background:

- Social media applications are widely accepted for social and networking purposes; however, their use among health professionals and in the delivery of patient care is controversial.
- Multiple organizations have implemented policies and recommendations for appropriate social media use by members over the past few years, including the American Pharmacists Association.

Findings:

- Social media platforms have the potential to engage patients and help practitioners overcome multiple barriers in the delivery of health care.
- Maintaining patient privacy, security of information shared in the platform, and integrity of information shared are all concerns when using this type of Web application.
- Overall, the literature reinforced the need to balance the dilemma of tapping the positive potential of social media in patient care with the negative repercussions that come with uncontrolled user-generated content.

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