

Social Media and Tomorrow's Medical Students—How Do They Fit?

Niamh M. Foley, MB,* Bridget M. Maher, MB,[†] and Mark A. Corrigan, MD*[†]

*Breast Research Centre, Cork University Hospital, Cork, Ireland; and [†]School of Medicine, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

OBJECTIVE: The main aim of our study was to establish the prevalence of social networking accounts among a group of second-level students (aged 15-18 years), to determine whether they used privacy settings, and to examine their attitudes to various aspects of social media use in medicine.

DESIGN: A descriptive study design was employed. The questionnaire was constructed specifically to address the attitudes of students to social media. No similar suitable validated questionnaire could be identified. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions with a mixture of open answer, yes/no, and Likert scale response options.

PARTICIPANTS: Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Second-level school children interested in studying medicine and aged between 15 and 18 years took part.

SETTING: An annual open day organized by the School of Medicine in University College Cork, Ireland, formed the setting. The day comprised a mixture of lectures, demonstrations, and practical sessions designed to give the students insight into life as a medical student.

RESULTS: A total of 96 students attended, and all were handed the questionnaires. Of them, 88 students completed the survey. Overall, 90.9% of students had Facebook accounts and 53% had Twitter accounts. Of those with social media accounts, 14.8% reported having no privacy settings. Most respondents felt that unprofessional behavior on social media sites should be a factor considered in admission to medical schools.

CONCLUSIONS: Serious consequences can result from lapses in best practice relating to social media behavior. Dedicated reflective learning modules need to be incorporated into undergraduate and postgraduate training programs as a matter of urgency. (*J Surg* 71:385-390.

Correspondence: Inquiries to Niamh M. Foley, MB, BCh, BAO, Breast Research Centre, Cork University Hospital, Wilton, Cork, Ireland; e-mail: foleynm@tcd.ie

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COMPETENCIES: Patient Care, Professionalism, Interpersonal and Communication Skills, Practice-Based Learning and Improvement

INTRODUCTION

In December 2012, Facebook had more than one billion active monthly users.¹ Expectantly, this has also affected medicine, with the use of social media by doctors proving controversial over recent years, generating concern that it may blur the traditional boundaries between professional and personal life.²

It has recently been demonstrated that younger doctors are more likely to engage with social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.³ and in 2008, a survey of medical students and residents at the University of Florida, Gainesville, showed that 44.5% had a Facebook account.⁴ Just 4 years later, a group of 410 medical students from University of Barcelona reported an 89.8% use of Facebook.⁵ These findings are consistent with those by Bosslet et al.⁶ in the United States who showed online social media use of 94% among medical students, 79.4% among residents, and 42% among practicing physicians ($n = 455$). This doubling in Facebook use by medical students between 2008 and 2012 highlights the rapid expansion in online social media use and how this surge is amplified in the youngest group of medical professionals.

In the United States, a group of first-year medical students were surveyed with regard to their attitudes and behaviors relating to social media use. The students received a 2-hour seminar on professionalism pertaining to online social media use and were given questionnaires before and after the seminar. After the seminar, 40% of students

intended editing or changing their web presence.⁷ In 2009, a study published in JAMA examined the posting of unprofessional content online by medical students. Of the 78 medical schools contacted, 47 had reported incidents of students posting unprofessional content online but only 28 of 73 schools had policies concerning student-posted online content.⁸ Although almost all US medical schools have a Facebook presence, the majority do not have professionalism policies that explicitly address online social networking behavior.⁹

An editorial in the NEJM (2009) describes how a doctor “only a few weeks” into his internship, received a “friend request” from a patient on Facebook. The doctor, as a medical student, had assisted at the birth of the patient’s baby. Despite having some concerns about the request, the doctor clicked “confirm.”¹⁰ This case highlights the difficulties arising from the distinction between the personal and professional lives of doctors on the Internet and is a situation that many doctors would relate to. Integrating social media into medicine has the potential to improve patient care. However, it raises a number of ethical dilemmas, not least those surrounding the delineation between personal and professional identities. A survey performed in 2012 found that 47% of consumers would like to be able to share health-related information on a social media platform with doctors (1006 respondents),¹¹ a percentage that will presumably rise with the ageing of current social media users and their transition into becoming our primary patient cohort.

Using a descriptive study design, we examined the attitudes of school-going students, intent on becoming doctors, to the role of social media in medicine.

The main aims of the project were to establish the prevalence of social networking accounts among this group, to determine whether they used privacy settings, and to examine their attitudes to various aspects of social media use in medicine.

METHODS

University College Cork, Ireland, hosts an annual open day for second-level school children who are interested in studying medicine. The students attend a specially structured program consisting of lectures, demonstrations, and practical sessions designed to give them an insight into life as a medical student.¹² The morning program is based at the school of medicine and includes clinical skills training, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and a visit to the anatomy laboratory, and the afternoon program is based at Cork University Hospital and includes discussions on ethical issues, crime scene investigation, and the opportunity to watch real-time robotic surgery.

The students in attendance this year were aged between 15 and 18 years. These students normally sit the established

Leaving Certificate at 17 or 18 years of age, and this forms the basis for which places in third-level institutions are allocated. The average age of direct entry into Irish medical schools is 19 years. At the end of the day-long program, the students (96) were invited to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire was constructed specifically to address attitudes of the students to social media, and despite a review of the literature, no suitably validated questionnaire could be identified. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions that used a mixture of open answer, yes/no, and 5-point Likert scale response options. It also contained questions on unrelated topics and as such, only the responses relating to social media use were included here. Within the questionnaire, privacy settings are understood to be the choices users make to restrict the information shared on social media platforms with other users. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. No coercion was involved in the completion of the questionnaire and students were allotted ample time to complete it. Basic demographics were recorded, along with attitudes to social media use. Data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed using SPSS version 18 (IBM corporation, Somers, NY).¹³

RESULTS

Demographics

A total of 96 students attended the Prep-for-Med School program. Of them, 88 completed the survey, giving a response rate of 90.6%. Most students were 15 ($n = 23$) and 16 ($n = 62$) years of age, with two 17 year olds and one 18 year old. Overall, 92% of students intended applying to study medicine at university, and 65% of students were female.

Social Media and Prospective Medical Students

Overall, 90.9% ($n = 80$) of students had Facebook accounts, while 53% ($n = 47$) had Twitter accounts. Less commonly, students had Bebo, YouTube, and Tumblr accounts. A total of 14.8% ($n = 12$) of students with social media accounts reported having no privacy settings.

Behavior on Social Media

In total, 56.8% ($n = 50$) of respondents felt that unprofessional behavior on social media sites is a factor that should be considered in admission to medical school. A total of 56 students (63.6%) believed that employers were within their rights to search social media sites for information on potential candidates. Only 9% of students ($n = 8$) felt that it was acceptable to post comments to social media sites about colleagues or patients. Overall, 10% ($n = 9$) of

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