

Medicine and Social Media

Almost every medical practice has a website. Altogether with it, come facebook's 'likes', twitters, feedbacks, reviews, and blogs. All of the tools of communication of, so called, social media were developed to help and assist with connecting among many users. Their purpose was to deliver messages as quickly as possible to as many users as possible. They all became a large platform for internet conversations and a great marketing tool.

I wish I could say they continue being such a conversation and sometimes they still are. However, more and more often, the platform that is supposed to assist us in communicating, is misused as a way to express feelings, seek attention, and finally, discuss medical problems.

If a patient comes for a medical visit and is happy with a quick solution, usually we see no comments. That changes when something is not quite to the expectation. Then, we can see comments about how bad the service was, how medication did not help to cure the problem, how the bill was too high, and similar. In most cases, the comments are out of context, represent a very individual and moment-related perception, and truly have nothing to do with the operations of the practice. Often, language used to address the issue is less than polite. And finally, the worst of all, medical advices are being discussed openly and frequently receive feedbacks of other users who comment on medical problems with their own experience.

Computers do not talk back to us so patients can write whatever they wish and they often expect to hear back from others. Their comments are read by many other patients (users) who share their medical and non-medical experience in continuing conversations. And unfortunately, some of the comments and feedback might be taken as a medical advice. In situations like this, internet tools that are supposed to help us communicate might actually cause more harm than benefit.

Under no circumstances, we would respond to any of our patients with medical advice discussion on social media. While we read



feedbacks and messages coming through their channels on a regular basis, we do not use them to schedule appointments, verify prescriptions, gather medical information, or advise on treatments. Contrary, seeing any medical information posted, we make sure to contact respective patients on the phone with request that the medical information is protected and should not be discussed on social media.

Privacy and confidentiality are very important in medicine. We all appreciate when others treat us with respect and do not disclose our personal information. Confidentiality is a part of federal HIPAA regulation and must be followed in all forms by everybody interacting with medical practice or hospital. Yet, somehow social media become a forum of massive abuse of confidentiality and privacy. It is crucial to remind all of our patients that internet tools are just what they were developed to be: tools to help us, and not media to overwhelm and harm us. Let's make sure that medicine is discussed in the privacy of our exam rooms, with all respect due to the patients and doctors.

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