Opinion

The importance of social media to clinical practice

> **"**...digital literacy must be in the medical curriculum worldwide. This is the only proper way of preparing medical professionals for a world full of digital technologies.**"**

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One of the most fundamental elements of the practice of medicine is communication. Medical professionals have to communicate with colleagues, patients and sometimes even with digital tools and information. As the internet has changed several parts of our lives, it has had a huge impact on medical communication as well.

Patients motivated by symptoms become e-patients who use digital technologies and online resources in strategically managing their health. These patients are empowered, engaged and experts in their own conditions therefore they have special questions and require a different approach from their caregivers [1]. E-patients mine support groups for new information about their treatments; launch their own biotechnology companies [101] and keep themselves up-to-date.

Based on these reasons and the exponentially growing amount of clinical information, it is inevitable now to use the online world in practicing medicine. Compared to traditional methods, keeping ourselves up-to-date on the internet without running after the information is simple, as Really Simple Syndication provides us with the opportunity of getting updates from all medical journals and news sites in one place or even receiving automatic e-mail alerts from Pubmed.com, the biomedical database, focusing on our particular fields of interest. Search operators let us find accurate clinical or scientific content online rapidly without browsing the internet for hours wasting time and effort. Patients previously asked about books and articles focusing on their conditions, now they ask about medical websites and blogs; therefore they should receive proper recommendations about either books or blogs from their caregivers.

Moreover, there are no collaborative barriers any more as crowdsourcing is now an option to find a solution for a complicated medical problem on medical community sites. I successfully used my international medical Twitter community for crowdsourcing a difficult diagnosis owing to the fact that I knew my 'followers' in a professional manner [2]. This underscores the notion that we have to use a hub of international expertise to solve critical issues and social media provides us with the right tools for that.

The final goal for a healthcare professional is to spend the least possible time online but make that time period as efficient as possible.

The trend of patients taking matters into their own hands by using digital solutions is imminent and will become even more massive whether

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their doctors like it or not. This is the basic point medical professionals have to accept. As a matter of fact, there are two possible scenarios:

- Patients will lead this movement and will use whatever information or digital channel they find online;

- Medical professionals become guides for their patients, even regarding the use of such digital technologies.

Obviously, the second scenario leads to a real partnership between patient and doctor, although it requires a special skill set from both sides.

Patients have previously been able to measure blood glucose content or blood pressure at home, but due to the incredible technological advances, they will soon be able to perform an ECG or even genetic tests at home, which means they will bring data to the practice, which should be properly analyzed, whether it comes from a home diagnostic tool or a smartphone application. This is part of the job of a doctor in the 21st century.

One aspect must be described in detail. Social media is not a solution, only a method. There are no major differences between offline and online communication. It is true social media provides us with a faster, more interactive and archivable way of communication, but the focus is still on the real-life relationship between patient and doctor. This is and will always be the basic element of practicing medicine, although in the process of this, the use of digital technologies is indispensable.

The real challenge here is that medical professionals have never been trained to address such issues.

Future perspective

Once, I summarized the future of medicine in one Twitter message containing only 140 characters: "In 2050, healthcare is transparent, decision trees are available, online content is curated, patients are empowered, doctors are web-savvy, and collaborative barriers are gone forever."

In order to fulfill this prediction, there are certain steps to take.

First, digital literacy must be in the medical curriculum worldwide. This is the only proper way of preparing medical professionals for a world full of digital technologies. I have been teaching

medical students and graduated professionals since 2008 and at Semmelweis University, parallel English and Hungarian courses are available as an official part of the curriculum [102]. Topics such as the basics of the internet, using Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia, blogs, Facebook, search engines, scientific communities and many other platforms in medicine and healthcare; as well as how to deal with e-patients or how to collaborate efficiently online are covered. Through real-life examples and interactive sessions, students learn to use digital solutions in a secure way.

Second, such a curriculum should be available online as well. An e-learning platform, The Social MEDia Course, was launched in 2012 in order to cover the same issues and topics for an international audience where members can watch presentations, access hand-outs and take tests, which could result in receiving a certification [103].

Third, the first handbook of using social media in clinical practice was released in August 2013 in order to transmit such knowledge and skill sets to areas without proper internet connection [3].

Fourth, we must keep on empowering patients by giving them access to curated online resources focusing on their conditions. Webicina curates and manually selects with international experts, quality social media resources in 140 medical conditions and specialties in 20 languages for free [104]. Besides this, there are hundreds of quality community sites and a growing number of health-related smartphone applications.

Fifth, all stakeholders of healthcare should be prepared for future technologies by focusing on the evidence-based approach.

As the digital revolution has been going on for a decade, it is time for medical professionals to accept these trends and start becoming more efficient, up-to-date and accurate; as well as serving as guides for their patients online.

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