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MEDICAL CONNECTIVITY

Twittering Healthcare: Social Media and Medicine

Introduction

It's mildly surprising to look for a definition of "social media" and not find it to be: an Internet-based way to stay in touch with friends, waste time, and kill productivity. It is, instead, loosely defined as user-generated content utilizing Internet-based publishing technologies, distinct from traditional print and broadcast media.

If there is a key differentiator for social media, it is the phrase "user-generated," distinguishing it from the content created by professional journalists, broadcasters, or other paid content providers.

If the concept of social media started with chat rooms and moved on to listservs, blogs, and RSS feeds, then social network sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn, the biggest current attention-grabber in the evolution of social media is Twitter.

What is Twitter, and does it have applications to healthcare and telemedicine?

Twitter

On the Twitter Web site, it is defined as "a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?"

Fair enough, if rather general. The key to Twitter is called micro-blogging, which has some relationship to text messaging (texting). A blog is a Web log, or online diary, where people can write their thoughts and allow readers to interact with what they publish. Texting is a way to communicate via cellular phone by sending text messages that are 160 characters or less and are read on a mobile device.

Twitter takes those concepts a step further. Once someone has a Twitter account, they can enter messages 140 characters or less, which are then sent out to anyone else on Twitter who is following that account. Vice versa, after signing up, you can search for people of interest and follow what they have to say at any given moment. It can

be read on the individual homepage on Twitter or have the messages pushed to or from a mobile device. A message is called a "tweet."

In March 2009, Nielsen.com ranked Twitter as the fastest-growing site in the Member Communities category for the previous month. There's not a lot of consensus on how many people are actually using Twitter, with estimates ranging from 4 to 5 million users to 6 million monthly visitors, with monthly visits hitting 55 million. It appears to have a 60% dropout rate as well.

Although as a "social entertainment" Twitter is remarkably successful—it's a wonderful time-waster—the more significant question, especially as it pertains to telemedicine and e-health, is: What good is it?

Joseph C. Kvedar, M.D., Director of the Center for Connected Health (Partners Healthcare System, Boston, MA), says that one way to look at Twitter is as a method of mass communication. "It's a bit like having a group of people you can instantly send a blast fax or blast e-mail or a blast communication to because it's real-time and because it was designed for mobility. Instead of being like texting my daughter, I might now text 30 people or 50 or 100 people, whatever the number is who are following you."

Several healthcare practitioners and organizations are putting Twitter to use.

The Individual Physician

Michael Lara, M.D., is a board-certified psychiatrist and neurologist practicing in Belmont, California. He is also an early adopter of technology and runs a blog called "BrainTwits of Michael Lara, MD: Musings on Mind, Brain and Body in the Age of the Internet": http://mlaramd.typepad.com/michael_lara_md/. He cites three ways a physician can use Twitter. First is to communicate with other team members. In this respect it's not much different than a text message or e-mail, but it goes out to more people simultaneously. Lara says, "For instance, I'll get a tweet from one of my office staff, if I'm not in my office, saying that Mrs. Jones has canceled her 3:00 appointment."

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