ELECTRONIC
COMMUNICATION IN PHARMACY SETTINGS

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Abstract:Today's healthcare system is using much of the technology given by the online opportunities. Up to a certain extent, we may even say that the new technology has come to influence the relationship between the patient and the healthcare provider. The aim of this paper is to focus on the online opportunities used in pharmacy settings. The e-mail and the Internet by and large are tools that are frequently used by both patients and pharmacists. Each communication means has its specificity, therefore special attention should be given to the way in which they are used as they may affect communication with the patient.

Keywords*: online communication, pharmacy settings, Internet, email, Internet technology.*

Out of all the domains belonging to the health care system, probably the pharmaceutical one has been the most reluctant of all when it came to the use of the Internet in their services. Undoubtedly there are many professional reasons behind this attitude towards the online possibilities, but it is also a fact that there are many advantages in using all these possibilities that outweigh the disadvantages. The purpose of using all these possibilities today have a unique purpose, that of developing a better relationship with the patient in order to improve the medical services. It is a known thing that people, before going to the doctor, seek for medical information on the Internet. Most of the times it is hard for them to select this information, therefore health care professionals (doctors, pharmacists) should offer their help to guide them and help them with additional information. It is not only about giving additional information, but also the correct amount of information the patient may be looking for. People are now using the Internet for all sorts of reasons (getting news, buy products, send messages, spend time on social networks). This category of people is more likely to become the patients to be willing to use the electronic communication when it comes to medical services. According to Eysenbach, nowadays there are several factors that influence pharmacy practice: social networking (the building of relationships or connections among people), participation (the direct involvement of patients in the management of their own health care and health-related information and services through the use of a collaborative filtering process), collaboration (the connection of people who would not normally be able to connect) and openness (the ability to move patient information across separate systems) (Eysenbach 2008). Basically, this category of patients will constitute the largest online audience. Once pharmacists can determine their target audience, they will be able to set up their plans and strategies in a more effective way. Obviously pharmacists should not restrict themselves only to developing this electronic communication with their patients, but also with some other health care professionals (including doctors) and business partners. The new

technology can improve interprofessional relationships as well. Electronic prescriptions may be sent via emails, while social networks (that are very popular) may be used for professional purposes as well. With business partners a lot of time is saved, sending information via email means a fast way to communicate, overcoming the challenge of distance and time, which are very important elements in business transactions. As these opportunities offer a better and a more efficient health care system, pharmacists should also possess those skills that are compulsory in the field of web-based services. Moreover, such services should be available in all pharmacies. Once these details are established, we can see how *social media* may be used by pharmacists. The term *social media* as such has been characterized as bi-directional or interactive, dynamic and utilizing push technologies (Boulos 2006).

Emails are very popular and have become part of our everyday life. Generally speaking, emails are easy to use and patients, no matter the age, prefer this way of communication (Singh 2009). For patients emails save a lot of time and overcome the need of their physical presence in the pharmacy. Another advantage in such circumstances is that some patients may find it easier to communicate with their pharmacist as the nonverbal component of communication disappears. Patients may send emails to the pharmacists to ask questions about medicines or about refilled prescriptions, but this is not that much about the way in which patients use these electronic means, but rather about the way in which pharmacists approach these possibilities. In pharmacy settings emails may be used for scheduling, to request a refill (especially with patients suffering from chronic diseases), obtaining test results (some systems require a strong relationship between the patient's physician and pharmacist), or simply clarifying questions. There are several rules pharmacists need to know when they write emails to their patients. Emails should have a clear content. The content of the message should be written in the "subject" line, thus the receiver of the message will be able to learn from the subject what the email is about (thus the pharmacist may read the message immediately or later). Another important detail is that of creating short paragraphs. People are overwhelmed by long texts, especially when we speak about reading from screens). Moreover, medical information, in order to be understood, should be short and to the point. Undoubtedly the problem of privacy and confidentiality becomes an issue when writing emails. The deletion of an email is never complete (somewhere, in a server, the email will continue to exist). Besides, someone else may have access to the recipient's computer. These are details anyone should have in mind before writing and sending an email: "A pharmacist promotes the good of every patient in a caring, compassionate and confidential manner /…? With a caring attitude and a compassionate spirit, a pharmacist focuses on serving the patient in a private and confidential manner" (http://www.pharmacist.com/code-ethics). Thus in pharmacy settings email etiquette becomes even more important. Pharmacists should never use the patients' names. If pharmacists decide on developing this way of communication with their patients, they should check emails at definite times on the day. Good email etiquette would also require the use of an automatic reply if messages were received (patients like this kind of confirmation), and also an automatic signature and full contact information along with the advertisement of the pharmacy business. Pharmacists may also send commercials and advertisements to show products on sale or notify the patient on any change in the schedule. Sometimes emails are joined by the so-called *attachments*. The attachment as such may be a different document in itself that has its own structure and purpose. When joined by such attachments, the email has to make reference to the content of the attachment. Some other times, the attachment develops some ideas contained by

the email (with the purpose of avoiding a too long text in the email). Since emails are a rapid form of communication, the sender probably expects a fast answer. If the pharmacist does not have the time to give a fully detailed answerto the problem, he / she may simply notify the sender for having received the message, promising that he / she will return with more detailed information.

With *websites*, pharmacists may get even closer to their patients. Besides the chance to increase their business activity, the pharmacy's credibility will also have to gain. Through a website, patients may be more easily updated on products and services. A pharmacy website may disseminate information more easily and it may also save money from advertising. Pharmacists may promote certain products directly on their website. Such a website may be accessed from anywhere in the world, so pharmacists may also take into account the possibility of selling products online (thus pharmacies will no longer need to open other offices in different areas). Pharmacy websites definitely help to improve communication with patients, but they may also offer educational resources for a younger audience. For those who are in the business field, the online presence has become very important. Instead of developing a page on a social network (a page that will never belong to them), pharmacists will get by far more benefits from developing a website of their own. Of course, no one forbids pharmacists to be on social networks as well (on the contrary, the presence on social networks has its advantages), but a pharmacy website will definitely respond better to professional needs. Pharmacy websites should be personalized so as patients may easily recognize the brand. The website should clearly state the pharmacy's mission and goal, but also vision and purpose. Pharmacy websites should stand out from the crowd (especially when that crowd is the whole world wide web that is full of similar information). The webpage has to be appealing and interactive to the client. The language used on the site has to be accessible, easy to understand. Specialists say that web writing resembles the journalistic style and the writing for advertising. Anyone would like his / her virtual visitors to come back to the site (one visit is never enough), therefore a pharmacy website should be able to persuade with convincing arguments. Using the appropriate style and language, pharmacists may create an appealing website clients will return to. Besides the written text, the website may use a combination of sound, pictures and graphic elements. Nonetheless the text dominates. The design is also important. Just as nonverbal communication adds extra meaning to verbal communication, so the design of the page may be able to transform the visitor's experience on the site into a unique one. Nowadays most pharmacies have a website (there are even some pharmacies that exist only online, virtual pharmacies, which provide only online services for their customers) through which pharmacies may build a whole brand. Besides the dynamic part of the website (that is continuously being updated – the part containing information about products and services), the website also contains a more static part that does not need to be changed. This may contain the story of the pharmacy, the name of the brand that will tell the story of the permanent care for the patients and professionalism.

After all the purpose of these online possibilities nowadays is to maintain friendship, to improve the relationship between health care professionals and their patients. Thus the social media can become a very powerful instrument that helps health care professionals to share information about medical services, but also answer patients' questions, provide them with useful information.

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