SOCIAL MEDIA IN HEALTH CARE SETTINGS

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Abstract: Social media has become part of our everyday lives. People use social media for personal reasons, but also for their business practices. Social media has penetrated the health care system as well. Patients seek for medical information online, and doctors, in their turn, exchange medical information with their professional counterparts. The Internet is indeed a source of information for the patient and we may find a lot of benefits of using the Internet in the health care setting. Nonetheless, besides all these benefits, the use of social media should not become a target in itself in health care settings, but rather a tool that would help to improve doctor-patient communication. Thus, in order to improve the relationships with their patients, doctors have to use social media in a meaningful way. Otherwise, besides the obvious aim to educate the patient, social media and the use of the online technology by and large in health care setting may ultimately have a harmful effect on the doctor-patient relationship.

Keywords: online medium, social media, doctor-patient relationship, communication, information.

Many psychologists have the certain conviction that the use of social media has completely changed the way in which people interact today. This statement is not valid only for the virtual world, but for the whole way in which we interact with each other every day. Thus our relationships have come to be different in the sense that the same speed and lack of patience we are confronted with when we are in front of a screen may be now seen in the traditional way of understanding a relationship. Starting our paper from such a perspective may seem rather

skeptical, nonetheless, though society has changed and is continuously changing, we have to adapt ourselves to these changes without losing our sense of being human.

Nowadays everybody understands more or less the notion of social media. In simple terms, social media is the virtual space where people may communicate, share information and knowledge. Posts people share may have different formats, from written texts to audio posts and videos. The devices used to perform all these activities may also take different forms, from mobile phones (smart phones), laptops and computers to tablets. The only other thing you may need is the access to an Internet connection. Some examples of familiar social networks (media) that are used today are Facebook (that may be defined as a social network that allows its users to create a profile, connect with other users, post comments, share information and exchange messages), Twitter (an online social networking service that enables users to send and read short messages called "tweets", if you are registered as a member), YouTube (a media sharing platform that allows users to view and share videos with a global audience), Wikipedia (a free online encyclopedia that anyone can edit – therefore, sometimes, it may contain misleading information; otherwise, it is considered a quite comprehensive source of information online), blogs (some sort of personal online pages – such as blogspot, tumblr, blogger etc. – where people can share their own texts or images, sharing them with anyone). One cannot say that any of these social networks is more popular than another, not even if we speak about different fields of activity. Any field of activity may nowadays make use of all these social networks, and get a benefit out of them. Undoubtedly, using social media in business nowadays has its risks, but professionals in the field are continuously trying to improve the system every day, and are trying to offer counseling on how to make the most of its use. People see how "friending" customers online will bring more benefits to business practice in general. People start to "like" pages, "share" information provided by specific companies and institutions. Thus today it has all come to building a sort of online relationship with your partner. The Internet is here and now, so one important requirement for this type of communication is to be real, authentic. Unlike the written form of communication (a magazine or a newspaper), social media implies from the very beginning the idea of communication understood as the active exchange of ideas between the sender and the receiver. They may exchange these messages in real time, therefore the sender of such messages online are required to be there, available online, ready to provide answers and feedback for their audience. We wouldn't be wrong in saying that the online presence requires

more involvement in your business activity because, if you are not there for your followers, they will lose interest and you will lose your "followers". In his online article, Joe Andrews says that "the nature of social media requires business to engage with customers differently than you did in a broadcast-based marketplace, but if you can switch from selling to teaching, and embrace transparency, your brand will see huge benefits (https://www.zuora.com/2014/05/29/three-ways-to-use-social-media-to-build-relationships-and-three-ways-to-ruin-them/). Thus, definitely, social media requires you to be open to dialogue. People will need a feedback, an answer to their questions. Since we can no longer speak abut the beginnings of social media in business activities, we can also say that people are really interested in quality in your online business. Quality (and not quantity) will make a business activity unique and special among others on the vast online territory. Speaking about how social media is changing brand / consumer relationships, Grant Cardone, an entrepreneur, sales coach, author and keynote speaker, says: "If a business is not taking advantage of social media and use it to directly engage with customers, and potential customers, they are missing an opportunity in a big way (https://www.zuora.com/2014/05/29/three-ways-to-use-social-media-to-build-relationships-and-three-ways-to-ruin-them/).

Nonetheless, the Internet is not a space free of rules and regulations. Specialists emphasize the fact that nowadays the aim is no longer to add traffic to your site. These days are gone. As we have already said, people no longer want to waste time on the Internet, and therefore they look for quality on the pages they are visiting: "People see thousands of ads everyday, and if they start to feel like your profile or feed is just another commercial, they will tune it out" (https://www.zuora.com/2014/05/29/three-ways-to-use-social-media-to-build-relationships-and-three-ways-to-ruin-them/). A business manager should try to find ways to build a solid relationship with his / her online partners. A fist important step is to find the appropriate tools needed for the business practice. Stephanie Ciccareli, in the same online article, says that "the first thing any company needs to do when evaluating their time on social networks is to find the spots their customers are already gathering in. For us, we've identified Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to be the most utilized by our customers, with each social network presenting unique opportunities to communicate and build relationships (https://www.zuora.com/2014/05/29/three-ways-to-use-social-media-to-build-relationships-and-three-ways-to-ruin-them/).

Another problem that specialists have identified when using social media in your business practice, is not to be able to keep your voice: " Social networks are busy places, and it's easy to get caught in the trends. Make sure you are always going back to your brand's vision, and values, and stick to your strategy (https://www.zuora.com/2014/05/29/three-ways-to-use-social-media-to-build-relationships-and-three-ways-to-ruin-them/). Coming back to an idea expressed earlier, we may say that the concern of businessmen shouldn't be that of losing the track with technology (though we need to keep updated), but this should never overpass the content of your business ideas: "The goal of your social media strategy should not be to fit with popular marketing trends. The goal is to stand out, and the best way to stand out in your networks is honest, authentic relationships" (https://www.zuora.com/2014/05/29/three-ways-to-use-social-media-to-build-relationships-and-three-ways-to-ruin-them/). Quoting the Vice President of Digital Marketing for the Patron Spirits Company, Adrian Parker says: "It's so easy to be biased by the tech trends and software solutions that distract you from the real focus: delighting customers. Social media has transformed the way in which we do business by focusing on consumer needs and empowering users. Many of us forget that the true head of social network is our customer, and they ultimately want to be in control. No one wants a relationship with a tech platform. The technology is the enabler and it's best when it's invisible" (https://www.zuora.com/2014/05/29/three-ways-to-use-social-media-to-build-relationships-and-three-ways-to-ruin-them/). We do understand the author's perspective here, nonetheless there will always be voices to argue that on a webpage, the design, the writing and the technology all rate equally. We may find enough reasons to support this idea as well, but when we speak about fields of activities that have nothing to do with the idea of entertainment, maybe we can agree to the fact that the content of the webpage should be determinant.

Medicine is a field in which social media has come to be used. And we will not be surprised to see that social media is used according to the above mention principles that function in any business practice. The only difference is that the partner or the consumer will be now called the patient. Or sometimes the doctor's fellow counterparts or other health care professionals. It's no use in giving supplementary reasons for which social media's presence in health care settings has found its use. Information travels fast online and that would be a reason enough to support the use of social media in medicine by and large. It is obvious that all these advantages come with their risk so some caution is required. One of the major advantages of

social media in health care settings is the possibility of sharing information in a very fast manner. Doctors and health care professionals may keep themselves informed and updated with the latest discoveries in the field. Patients, in their turn, may easily hare knowledge and information with other patients suffering from the same diseases.. Likewise, doctors may keep in touch with their patients (sharing general public information useful for people). Sometimes, problems may be addressed individually, when a patient may seek for some specific advice: "health organizations utilize these tools and websites to share information with customers in a variety of way such as sharing information about flu shots and tips to avoid a cold. Sharing news regarding outbreak and healthcare facilities to provide accurate information to patients […]. Other forms of sharing information through social media include: provide updates on new technology, introduce new doctors on a practice on social networks, answer questions on various topics, deliver generic pre- and –post operative care information, offer patients any updates that relate to the practice itself" (http://elearning.scranton.edu/resource/business-leadership/top-5-ways-social-media-is-used-by-healthcare-professionals). The doctor's presence online will help patients get an immediate feedback by reading other patients' rating of the doctor. Up to a certain extent all this exchange of information between patients may help the doctor improve his / her skills. Likewise doctors may keep informed on how their colleagues build their presence online. By comparing things, doctors may see what actually works in the practice and borrow anything that proves its efficiency in relation to the patient by and large.

Lately another good use of social media has proved to be effective has been the so-called online training practices of the medical personnel: "There has been an increase in the number of doctors and surgeons providing updates from the operating room. Through Twitter and other social media outlets, health care professionals have the ability to deliver up-tp-date information during procedures, to fellow doctors, medical students or simply curious individuals. Some say that these updates are a distraction in the operating room, while others argue that it is an innovation and provides educational value that should be embraced (http://elearning.scranton.edu/resource/business-leadership/top-5-ways-social-media-is-used-by-healthcare-professionals). During time of crisis, the use of social media has found its effectiveness by providing both doctors and patients with the fastest news: "In time of crises, the use of social media has increased to provide minute by minute information to consumers. Through social media, hospitals and other organizations are able to deliver real-time updates on

hospital capacity, operation states and emergency room access" (http://elearning.scranton.edu/resource/business-leadership/top-5-ways-social-media-is-used-by-healthcare-professionals).

Looking at the field of medicine from the perspective of a field that needs to adapt itself very quickly to the new requirements given by the society's needs, we also need to emphasize the patients' need to adapt themselves to the requirements of the new technology. It is now easier than ever for patients, especially those suffering from chronic diseases to make use of the facilities offered by social media. Keeping in touch with your doctor online may save a lot of time, money and energy. Such patients no longer need to visit the doctor regularly, moreover, we have it at hand nowadays even the possibility to fill in electronic prescriptions that may be sent directly to pharmacy hospitals or the chemist's shop. Indeed, doctors have started to be more approachable by being present online. Distant patients may use the same benefit of keeping in touch with their doctors if they have to discuss minor problems. Thus social media has facilitated extension of clinical care to distant patients as well: "telemedicine was there in the 1960s, but it was only recently that it has achieved rapid growth and has been considered safe (Currell 2000). By and large the most important thing about the patient's access to online resources is that they may be more easily educated in this respect (see, for instance, Hillview Surgery's Channel) (Enthouse Blog: http://enthouse.blog.hu). Or they may simply interact with physicians and ask questions, or talk to other patients to share knowledge (Hirsch 2001). From the perspective of healthcare profession, the online possibilities are numerous. Besides keeping in touch with the patient, offering them feedback and counseling specialists in the field may more easily find volunteers for clinical trials. In the future, healthcare professional societies may be replaced by online networks, reducing thus a lot of costs involved in such activities (traveling, accommodation etc.). In case of severe disease outbreaks, public health organizations have more easy access to keep the population informed and alerted.

Undoubtedly the health care system will take into consideration all the opportunities offered nowadays by social media. As long as the health care professionals do not forget that at the center of all these activities should be the patient's care and welfare, things are supposed to remain on a safe path. Specialists in the field are continuously working on finding some reglementations for the use of social media in public health, hoping to prevent any flaws that

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may penetrate the system. Thus there are some global updates available on the internet, that focus on how to best make use of social media in health care system. They speak about the importance to develop an active online presence, considering this thing almost compulsory in the new context. Once you are online, you need to develop a social media policy to protect against security, privacy and ethics breaches by employees. Social media should be used to enhance marketing, branding, recruitment, reputation, management, customer relation and customer service, but the most important idea is to educate yourself first on what is allowable under the laws of the country. The content of the social media should be accurate and kept up to date (http://assets1.csc.com/health_services/downloads/CSC_Should_Healthcare_Organizations_Use_Social_Media_A_Global_Update.pdf).

Definitely we cannot refer only to the benefits that come along with the use of social media in health care settings, as there are enough risks that should be taken into account. Internet interactions obviously lack nonverbal cues that are so important during a face-to-face medical encounter. The doctor is free to pick up so many cues as he / she is listening to the patient (discomfort, tendency to hide things). In absence of all these, communication may become misleading. Communication online has to be therefore very minutely treated and it should be restricted to some areas of medicine in which a patient's physical examination is not required. Social media should never replace a face-to-face encounter between the doctor and his / her patient. Another problem from the perspective of the doctor this time is how many hours he / she should be available online for the patient. If all this time spent on the Internet is devoted after office hours, we can soon realize the doctor will no longer have any personal time. Therefore spending too much time on these networks may lead to exhaustion, so some boundaries should necessarily be established.

Other risks may be given by the simple idea of "friending" your patient on a social network. Various vices argue that this is going to ruin the doctor-patient relationship (among them mention should be made of the emotional involvement) unless the doctor's page or profile is restricted only to professional things, that is without any personal reference (Bosslet 2001). In the same article it is mentioned the fact that in a sample that included medical students, resident physicians, and practicing physicians, the majority of respondents felt that it was equally

unethical to interact with patients using online social networks for either social or patient-care reasons.

When it comes to asking for medical advice, "the only legally sound approaches for physicians to respond to an electronic enquiry is with a standard response that in no way refers to the specific sender or the sender's disclosed information which (1) informs the questioner that the physician does not answer such online questions, (2) supplies the questioner with the physician's offline office information in case the questioner would like to make an appointment, and (3) provides contact information for the emergency services, and suggest the questioner contacts them if he or she cannot wait for an appointment during regular hours" (Terry 2010).

Another important risk is given by the easiness with which patients go online to look for medical advice. Unless it is a guided activity, this way of dealing with health issues is very dangerous. Doctors complain about this tendency of the patients lately, saying that in recent years this has affected the population's way with dealing with health problems a lot. Another important aspect to be taken into account is that the younger generation seems to be favored in the online medium as for them it is much easier to access the online resources. Therefore the older generation may be in danger of being omitted from this kind of approach. So some attention should be paid either to instructing older patients how to use the Internet resources, but also to the way in which doctors deal with this category of people, being careful not to assume they know things that are highly debated on social networks.

In conclusion we may say that these are still some years when the use of social media in health care settings may be considered a controversial issue. This is mainly because there aren't some fixed boundaries established when it comes to privacy, confidentiality, professionalism and ethics. Though in use for some time, we do believe that this is only the beginning of its use in the medical context, so we should expect a lot of improvement in the years to come.

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