Social Media among Medical Students and Personnel Here to Stay

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Abstract

Social media is no longer new, even in the professional medical world. It is an established and relatively public medium, and all users would do well to understand the risks associated with it. Medical personnel—whether medical student or staff physician—must familiarize themselves with it to ensure positive outcomes. As with other technologies, best practices will evolve with time, but existing and ongoing research can establish working use guidelines.

Keywords

medical student, social media

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Social media, now over a decade old, is no longer a budding technology, and its dynamics within a medical student–staff physician relationship are not particularly novel. As in other subordinate-superior relationships, there is inherent risk in disclosing previously private information, but the online relationship that students take with their resident or attending is ultimately up to them. However, as with any tool and just like email before it, social media requires familiarity—or failing that, education—for effective positive use.

Social media has not abruptly intermixed users’ personal and professional lives, nor has it changed the necessity for the separation thereof. With general understanding of the current use of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, they—much like anything online—should be treated as public spaces. As members of a professional field, medical professionals should maintain their professional conduct in such spaces. Those who enjoy sharing personal material and controversial thoughts should exercise additional caution on social media, much like how those with naturally loud voices should take caution with what they say in the workplace.

These professional standards apply to medical students and practicing physicians. When an attending or resident considers connecting with a student on networks such as Facebook and Instagram, which are not dedicated to professional use like LinkedIn or Doximity, they too must be aware of the possibility of mixing their private and professional relationships.

Although this topic stands for further study, research does exist specifically on social media in a clinical and academic context and its impact on medical professionals—students included. In brief, medical students and faculty alike post traditionally unprofessional content, the former more often, and both can be unaware of potential risks and ethical issues. Different groups have different ideas on what is appropriate for social media, and the views of students can significantly differ from those of residency admission committees and physicians. Despite that, many schools still do not have policies or education in place. Additionally, unprofessional conduct can continue despite awareness of guidelines. Dedicated reflective education on social media behavior should be offered to all medical professionals, and such curricula can only help.

Further inquiries into the field should seek to build on existing knowledge, and institutions—schools and hospitals alike—would do well to refer to this repository when crafting their curricula and policies.

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**References**


