the last word:

How social media can revolutionise the patient-doctor relationship

Cardiologist Dr Kevin Campbell explains why social media will drastically improve the relationship between patients and doctors and what both parties need to do in order to reap the full benefits of its use.

WITH THE RISE of social media, ideas that would have taken weeks to spread in the past can now do so in a matter of minutes. Social media platforms enable people all over the world to interact in real time and in a meaningful way. Moreover, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook can provide ways for patients to connect with each other, as well as with physicians and healthcare systems.

As part of the patient-doctor relationship, social media can provide unique opportunities for engagement that have never been present before. These new engagements have the potential to shake up the healthcare establishment and improve healthcare delivery and outcomes; studies have shown that when patients engage in their healthcare and invest in treatment and daily management of their disease, their outcomes improve.

THE POWER OF SOCIAL

Social media is a great way to provide patient support – from sharing ideas and motivating patients via blogs, to utilising Twitter chats for disease specific support groups. These arenas allow patients to share experiences; review doctors, hospitals and treatments; and learn from others. For example, I have a good friend, Dr Gia Sison, who is a primary care doctor in the Philippines. I met her via Twitter discussions surrounding healthcare. Over time, we developed a professional relationship and often privately discussed the care of some of her patients. Ultimately, our relationship became even more personal when we collaborated in the treatment of her father. During an unexpected illness, Gia messaged me via Twitter and explained that her dad was seriously ill with a major cardiovascular event. She went on to describe his clinical situation, and I was able to provide her with a likely diagnosis, and advice on the best treatment course and appropriate specialists in the Philippines. Fortunately, her father received exceptional care and has since improved.

SMARTPHONES, SMART CARE

I believe that at the heart of this surge in social media is the smartphone, and that doctors across the globe should embrace them not only in their activities to engage with patients, but in their general practices. Patients are more connected than ever and will continue to interact electronically with other patients, physicians and pharma companies. The availability of mobile devices will continue to facilitate these interactions – currently, more than 75 per cent of social media users access the internet via these devices daily. Moreover, these devices have amazing power, they can track our exercise, tell us our respiratory rate, assist us with clinical research and even take real-time electrocardiograms. Devices like the Apple Watch are likely to drive these advances even further.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

You can see the increasing benefits that social media is providing to the healthcare system in terms of heart health. Social media has already begun to impact cardiovascular medicine; in fact, we had social media sessions at both the American College of Cardiology (ACC) and Heart Rhythm Society (HRS) meetings this year. For example, at the 64th ACC Annual Scientific Session and Expo, we held a session devoted to discussing social media, the benefits it offers, and tips and tricks on how best to utilise it in the patient-doctor relationship. At this meeting, I gave a TED Talk, and we had an international panel of social media experts, with some discussions feeding into the room live from Europe via Skype. The audience was very engaged and more members have since signed up for Twitter accounts and become active in social media. I am seeing the same enthusiasm at the HRS meetings; it has even set a goal to have $0 per cent of members active on Twitter in the next year.

PRIVACY MATTERS

There are limits, however, to what can be done via social media. The first one involves patient privacy. Certainly, as physicians, we must take care to protect patient privacy, as laid out by Acts such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act in the US. Another limit involves the advice itself. My previously described interaction with Gia was different to how a normal patient-doctor conversation should happen online, as it involved a physician-to-physician consultation with the patient’s direct consent for discussion. Physicians must never provide specific medical advice directly to a patient via social media; all advice must be disease specific, not patient specific. Moreover, we must ensure that patients understand that social media is a platform for information and support – not a substitute for care by a doctor.

BETTER COMMUNICATION, BETTER CARE

With these concerns at the forefront of physicians’ minds, it is clear that we must become active in social media. It is the space where our patients are; in fact, three-quarters of patients are engaged online in some way both before and after seeing a physician. I suspect that this number is going to continue to increase – believe it or not, the largest growing demographic on Twitter is the 55-65 age group. The world is becoming more connected. Physicians should embrace this trend, because social media is here to stay. Our connectedness will allow for better access to information and care for those who otherwise may not be able to receive it.

Listen to Dr Kevin Campbell’s TED Talk about using social media to strengthen the patient-doctor relationship: bit.ly/DrKevinCampbell. Keep in touch with him on Twitter: @DrKevinCampbell