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Will Facebook Be the Next Doctor's Office?

As technology advances, the ways we communicate advance with it. Naturally, that communication advancement begins to encompass more and more areas of our lives. This time the advancement involves communication about our health care.

Is social media the new form of doctor-patient communication?

The results of a national survey conducted by Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health found that patients want more social media connection to their health-care providers.

The survey polled a participation group of over 2,000 pharmacy customers about their desired means of communication with health-care providers compared to what they actually have.

"On the one hand, doctors, policymakers, and researchers often talk about the need to engage patients," said Joy Lee, a postdoctoral fellow at the university. Yet, in many ways patients are engaged already through social media communities. However, because of concerns over privacy and professionalism, health-care professionals have yet to pursue this connection.

More than half of respondents were interested or already involved

Of all the survey participants, 57 percent, who were on average healthy and regular Facebook users, indicated they would like to communicate with physicians through email and Facebook. They clearly indicated they were interested in using social media as a means of managing their health.

Over half of the participants also expressed a desire to use websites of their physicians for access to health-care information. Meanwhile, a little more than one-third of respondents indicated they already communicate with physicians through email. Surprisingly, approximately 18 percent of people polled already connect with their physicians using Facebook.

“This study tells us that for most patients, health care isn’t quite ready for the future,” concluded Lee. It was primarily young adults, caregivers, regular Facebook users, and chronically ill patients that expressed the most likelihood of email and Facebook communication with doctors.

“Health care organizations need to figure out how to take advantage of resources like Facebook,” said Lee, while acknowledging that patient information would need to be safeguarded.

Electronic access to doctors and medical records

Thankfully, the health-care industry has recognized the need for digital interaction between patients and health-care providers. For many, the convenience of online access to medical information is extremely important. In particular, people who are handicapped, on bed rest, or homebound for other reasons, can still have immediate access to health care through electronic systems.

A growing number of hospitals and physicians have embraced the telehealth movement. Patients are often able to send and receive messages to their health-care establishment, immediately access test results, electronic copies of office visit notes and diagnoses, and other personal information.

“Many patients are interested in [these services] but few are actually using them — possibly because patients don’t know they’re available,” said Lee. “Doctors and healthcare organizations should take steps to publicize and educate patients of these opportunities. Either way, it starts with a conversation between patients and doctors on how they prefer to communicate online.”

What does the future hold?



In a recent report from Goldman Sachs, predictions were made about the future of the digital health-care revolution. In efforts to reduce the massive spending on health-care costs, the report predicts massive growth in telehealth, remote patient monitoring, and behavior modification.

It foresees patients being encouraged to adopt healthier lifestyles and having greater access to medical information through telehealth systems. Meanwhile, it expects remote patient monitoring to allow high-risk patients to be closely tracked.

Since approximately one-third of U.S. health-care spending is on chronic disease management, remote patient monitoring and behavior modification could bring about expense reductions.

“These disease states also represent the most fertile ground for digital health since data and modification of treatment paradigms have demonstrated improved patient outcomes, lower adverse events, and reduced costs,” the report stated.

Having medical information available at your fingertips can definitely be advantageous. Consider checking with your physician’s office if they have a telehealth system available that you can use to access information. A proactive approach to health is always a good idea.

—WeightsOverMD.com

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