Social Media and Health Care: Necessity of Facing Their Challenges

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Dear Editor-in-Chief

Social media, including microblogs (e.g. Twitter), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Patients like Me), and media sharing sites (e.g. YouTube) are influential in our everyday life. Today's, social media is considered a cultural phenomenon in all over the world (1). Studies revealed the majority of the U.S. adult internet users (75%) use social media (2); meanwhile, this figure is about 80 percent among young people in European Union countries (3). Healthcare provision has been affected by social media, so that different platforms for social media have been applied in various domains such as medical education, patient education, facilitating interaction between customers and healthcare providers, collaboration among health care teams, provision of consultative and curative/therapeutic forums, knowledge sharing and health campaigns (4). Furthermore, social media enable healthcare providers and policy makers to communicate any health issues with the public and to answer health questions. Social media facilitate patient-patient dialogue to gain perceptions and experiences from each other. Additionally, more objectives, including health education, health promotion and stigma reduction are achievable (5). In this regard, many healthcare organizations have developed such media to communicate with the public.

Researchers identified many advantages for the application of social media in health care. The major advantages consist of a better relationship between patients, providers and even health policy makers, social support, self-care, the ability to access to more information, information sharing, a greater accessibility to health information commensurate with users' needs, application of social media for public health surveillance and their positive influence on health policy making (5, 6).

In spite of the advantages, users of social media encounter many challenges such as lack of reliability; lack of privacy and confidentiality; users' and patients' ignorance of potential risks of health information disclosure; inaccurate medical advices; adverse health consequences; negative health behaviors and information overload. Additionally, patients may refuse to consult with health care providers due to social media usage. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that patients apply retrieved health information in terms of their conditions appropriately (5). These challenges may endanger patients and community health. Most of healthcare stakeholders including clinicians, administrators, professional institutions, academic centers and ministries of health are not cognizant of the impact of social media, their potential applications in daily activities and related procedures

for minimizing inherent risks threaten patients and are not ready to face these challenges (7).

Currently, leading healthcare organizations have developed specific guidelines and policies regarding the use of social media, and users are expected to follow them. Aforementioned guidelines have common characteristics in concepts like determination of social media activities, ownership, informed consents and authorization, respect of individual and organizational confidentiality, compliance with privacy laws, respect of copyright laws, separation of personal and professional activities, disclosure of disavowal of responsibility and conflict of interest, laws and policies related to medical records, coverage of malpractice insurance and terms of use (1).

Although, there are no accurate statistics on Iranian social media users, the number of Iranian internet users has been more than 40 million in the first quarter of this year and internet penetration rate is about 53.3 percent (8); and it seems this rate is going to rise. Consequently, adoption of social media applications in our healthcare industry is expected to increase. Therefore, it is important for healthcare providers, administrators, policy makers and experts of health information management and health information technology to adopt a proactive approach to meet the challenges of using social media in health care and take the growing opportunities of these media for health promotion.

In this regard, it is critical to develop local /national policies and guidelines based on learning and gaining experiences from other countries for protecting users' confidentiality and privacy rights and safeguarding patients from social media challenges and preparing our health care system for use of potential capacity of such valuable media.

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