

The New Face of Healthcare

When Fred wakes up one morning with a sore throat that is coated in white spots, he doesn't reach for the phone to set an appointment with his physician. Instead, he opens the search engine on his computer and types "white spots in throat." Immediately, 3.2 million links to medical websites pop up, many of which are undoubtedly medical blogs. Fred is not unlike most Americans today. Medical blogging has expanded drastically in the last few years and more people are looking to the Internet as a first resource for advice, answers and support ("Josie2007"). In addition, these blogs provide healthcare professionals and those studying to become a part of the field with an efficient medium to communicate with their peers worldwide. Although some of the more superficial uses of online social networking may soon fall to the wayside, the impact of medical blogging on the community and in the nation will certainly outlast the fad.

With the aid of online blogs, patients are better educated to take care of themselves and to understand illnesses that may be affecting them. Dr. Heinz Josef Lenz of The University of Southern California/Norris Cancer Center Genetics Unit has a blog set up for patients with colon cancer. He now has a loyal following that keeps up with his postings about cutting-edge research and clinical trials. If he were not submitting this information online, there would be no way for these patients to obtain anything like it. They would instead have to wait for the findings to be published, reviewed, and picked up by the media (Jones).

Patients can also find support that they may not otherwise be able to access. Those who have conditions that

limit mobility or who live in isolated areas may not be able to participate in an actual support group that requires them to attend meetings. Therefore, these online forums can be a lifeline for them and can give them a way to build a support network. Teens especially feel a need to fit in with others, and sometimes the social isolation caused by an illness can be devastating. Starbright World, an online resource for teens with various diseases, is a place where they can go to find a welcoming community. Neal Kaufman, MD, who is a proponent of Starbright World, says that the site is especially helpful for those with rare diseases who may not ever meet someone in person with the same disorder (Selis).

Daniel Pelaez was grateful for the resources that he found online when his son was diagnosed with Perthes, a degenerative bone disease. "Not knowing much about the disease was scary at first, so to be able to find out more facts and hear about other people's personal experiences was comforting and reassuring," he says (Pelaez). Since the initial diagnosis, Pelaez has continued to follow current events relating to the disease online.

Patients are not the only ones seeking advice through these mediums, though. Doctors also view blogging as a valuable resource in the process of diagnosis. Dr. Michael Tomblyn of the University of Minnesota Medical Center encountered a unique case when one of his patients experienced an eye popping out of its socket. He was able to consult with a large number of his peers worldwide by using the Internet and this, in turn, helped him to reach the diagnosis of Rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare form of cancer (Vascellaro). Had he not been able to communicate with such a broad spectrum of doctors with different experiences, this diagnosis might have never been reached.

In addition to consultations, medical blogs are fast becoming an invaluable resource for virtually all health-related news and information for professionals. George Garrett, a registered nurse, keeps up with current industry events by visiting various blogs. One of his favorite sites is Mediblogopathy which covers a variety of topics spanning from student affairs to healthcare industry news. He finds that it is easier to feel

connected to the community by reading such blogs and being able to provide feedback (Garrett).

The online community also assists health professionals with the various challenges of running a practice. Dr. Joel David looks to online networking sites to learn about cutting edge technologies in the medical field. He also gains insight into the different aspects of managing and running his practice by viewing the experiences and advice of others in the dental field (David).

Doctors and medical professionals are also beginning to embrace the concept of professional networking online. One popular site is SocialMD.com, where doctors, students, and residents can network with others. With over 2500 members on the site, a large number of people that would otherwise probably never have contact with each other are being brought together (Karuturi).

The impact that this fairly new resource is having on the healthcare industry as a whole is substantial. Not only is it changing the way that patients and doctors interact, but it is also changing the way that the media affects healthcare. Posting information that comes straight from healthcare professionals cuts back media spin and educates consumers. Dishonest health schemes are also being exposed and patients are better equipped to navigate through the fractured healthcare system (Jones). Paul Levy, CEO and President of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center of Boston, has been a pioneer in using blogs to bring attention to the shortcomings of some hospitals. He has challenged these hospitals in particular to make their health care statistics more lucid. This incident was even broadcast by the media because of its controversial nature (Suh). When the standards of the healthcare industry are publicly monitored, this can only benefit those involved – whether they are doctors, patients, or researchers.

Some of the larger organizations in the healthcare field have begun to branch out into social networking as well. The American Cancer Society and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have experimented with online communities and have seen a positive response from the public (“Josie2007”).

The recent partnership of a health-related website called Healia and Facebook also demonstrates the trend of healthcare in the online world. The various quizzes that Healia posts on Facebook are designed to create curiosity about health issues and direct users of Facebook to Healia's website (Edwards).

From the statistics from recent surveys that medical blogging has secured its place in the healthcare industry. Thirty-four percent of all adult online users (approximately 54 million people) are now using online networking for information regarding health concerns. In addition, 17 percent of those who use these sites say that they have used them to connect with others for emotional support while dealing with an illness or disease (Selis).

In regards to the future of online medical networking, Lichtenfeld, who authors a blog concerning new cancer developments for the American Cancer Society's website, has this to say: "To think that medicine isn't going to move in this direction is to deny the obvious. These communities will continue to grow. . ." (qtd. in Selis). Eric Suh, who is a journalist for *The Next Generation, An Introduction to Medicine*, an online medical journal covering a broad spectrum of topics for medical students and the public, shares the same views as Lichtenfeld and states in his article that "blogging may be viewed as merely a fad, but the singular transformation of the way the medical community reaches out and welcomes the public will probably never be lost" (Suh). It is evident that medical blogging has opened up a new chapter in the healthcare industry, one in which thoughts and experiences are expressed freely, education is available to everyone, and medical standards are upheld to a higher degree. It is safe to say that the medical field is forever changed and that online networking will continue to play a vital role in the shaping of the community for years to come.

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Annotated Bibliography

- David, Joel. Telephone interview. 2 Oct. 2007.
Dr. Joel David discusses how he uses online networking for advice and information on running his practice and using cutting edge technologies.
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Healia teamed up with Facebook to create more awareness and curiosity about health related issues. Edwards' blog post includes her interview with Jonathan Shaw, marketing assistant for Healia.com.
- Garrett, George. Telephone interview. 2 Oct. 2007.
Garrett relates how he uses online networking sites to keep up to date with news and events in the healthcare industry. His favorite site is Mediblogopathy.

 The Bullit Prize 2008

Jones, Val. "The Power of Medical Blogging." *Revolution Health, Your Home for Health*. [Weblog entry.] 30 Sept. 2007. 2 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.revolutionhealth.com/blogs/valjonesmd/the-power-of-medical-7865>>.

Dr. Heinz Josef Lenz, The University of Southern California/Norris Cancer Center Genetics Unit, blogs about colon cancer, particularly concerning clinical trials and cutting edge research. Patients would have no way of discovering this information other than waiting for it to be published, reviewed and hopefully translated correctly through the media. His posts include various other statistics about blogs and sites, including the influences of media spin, health policies, and dishonest medical schemes.

"Josie2007." "Social Networking in Healthcare." *Expert Voices: Speaking of Something Interesting*. [Weblog entry.] 28 Feb. 2007. 2 Oct. 2007 <<http://expertvoices.nsd.org/cornell-info204/2007/02/28/social-networking-in-health-care/>>.

"Josie2007" is the screen name of a blogger who reports that CDC and American Cancer Society have initiated online networking sites. According to "Josie2007," these communities are especially beneficial to those with rare disorders or who live in remote areas that limit access to support groups. People have started to look to the Internet as their first resource for health-related information.

Karutui, Subrahmanyam. "Social Networking for Doctors." *Dr. Subrahmanyam Karuturi, Random Musings of the Dotcom Doctor...* [Weblog entry.] 5 June 2007. 2 Oct. 2007 <<http://blog.karuturi.org/2007/06/social-networking-for-doctors.html>>.

Subrahmanyam lists advantages of medical blogs and names some specific sites: SocialMD, Clinical Village, Tiromed, etc.

Pelaez, Daniel. Personal interview. 2 Oct. 2007.

He used the Internet to research his son's disease. He explains, "Not knowing much about the disease was scary at first, so to be able to find out more facts and hear about other people's personal experiences was comforting and reassuring."

Selis, Sara. "Online Social Networking Brings Further Change to Doctor-Patient Relationships." *Consultant Live, Consultations in Primary Care*. 20 Feb. 2007. 2 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.consultantlive.com/>>.

Lichtenfeld comment:s. "'To think that medicine isn't going to move in this direction is to deny the obvious. These communities will continue to grow...'" Various statistics concerning usage of online medical blogs: 34% of all adult online users (approximately 54 million people) are now using online networking for information regarding health concerns. In addition, 17% of those who use these sites say

that they have used them to connect with others for emotional support while dealing with an illness or disease.

Suh, Eric. "Blogging Medicine." *The Next Generation, an Introduction to Medicine*. May 2007. 2 Oct. 2007 <http://www.nextgenmd.org/vol3-6/medical_blogs.html>.

Suh discusses the future of medical blogging as an outlet for unique and unusual perspectives. Paul Levy, CEO and President of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center of Boston, urged other hospitals to make their health statistics more transparent; media reported on this. Suh maintains that "blogging may be viewed as merely a fad, but the singular transformation of the way the medical community reaches out and welcomes the public will probably never be lost."

Vascellaro, Jessica E. "New Social Networking Sites Let Professionals Rub Virtual Elbows." *CareerJournal.Com*. 29 Aug. 2007. 2 Oct. 2007 <http://www.careerjournal.com/jobhunting/networking/20070829vascellaro.html?mod=RSS_Career_Journal&cjrss=frontpage>.

Dr. Michael Tomblyn had a 21 year old patient with an eye popped out of the socket and used online networking to confirm a diagnosis.

Walter. "The Medical Blogosphere and the State of Healthcare Blogging." *Highlight Health, Health From a Scientific Perspective*. 24 May 2007. 2 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.highlighthealth.com/healthcare/the-medical-blogosphere-and-the-state-of-healthcare-blogging/>>.

Blogger, a professional who uses the byline, "Walter," discusses the need for a code of ethics for online medical blogging.