

Social Media and the changing face of Orthopaedic Surgery in the future

Social Media

Noun. Treated as singular or plural. Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

Oxford Dictionary

Social media has evolved today as a new communication tool for healthcare delivery and its usage is increasing rapidly each day throughout the world. [1,2] The effects of this online relationship on clinical practice and patient–physician relationship have long been of interest. [3] The social dimension clearly enables greater self-expression and control of the impressions that others form of them. [4] Social media offers enhanced interpretation and immediate spread of visual or written content shared online, which caused changes in the nature and velocity of the communication between patients and physicians, resulting in the frequent use of social media to resolve health problems. [5] The classic doctor – patient relationship has been challenged by the invent of the social media. How many of us will actually remember our Professors telling us the importance of the “healing touch.” Though the physical touch may not be commonplace today with social media, the move to the “virtual touch” is now unavoidable. With the increasing availability of knowledge to all, we can also no longer use the paternalistic approach our forefathers used towards our patients.

In 2015, 84% of adults used the Internet on a regular basis and 80% of these user references online sources for health-related information [6,7]. With this came a boom in the number of social media websites or forums and networking options that allowed patients to communicate with other patients or their physicians. Due to the confusion that many physicians had with what they could have or share with their patients, most decided to ignore it but this is not going to work in the long run. Going forward, practicing orthopedic surgeons, physician groups, and hospitals have a decision to make, either control social media outlets or be controlled by them.

While running a clinic as a junior medical officer, I vividly remember a patient that came into my consultation room armed with various printouts of a condition that he had been diagnosed with by another colleague. He wanted to seek a second opinion on his torn anterior cruciate ligament. He wanted to know about the different options available (allografts, autografts, patella tendon, hamstring tendon etc.) and he even wanted to discuss single and double bundle reconstructions. It became clear to me from that consultations that the orthopaedic surgeons of the future need to be up to date, and be informed of the various conditions that we will be treating.

There is a clear potential for a more collaborative relationship now. The emphasis should be placed on ‘shared management’, with a greater acknowledgement that patients have expertise and experience of their own that can help inform a consultation. Even with a greater access to health information and data in the future, patients will still need someone who can interpret that information through the prism of experience and focus it. [8] The orthopaedic surgeon of the future will be an expert on people; compassionate and caring, with a holistic approach that

incorporates the use of new technologies. There will be continued respect and acceptance for all patients whose expectations will continue to grow. However, patients also need to take greater responsibility for their own health in the future: they need to be aware of how to help themselves, for example by using their IT knowledge but without cutting the doctor off. [8] They will need to be honest with themselves. It will be difficult for orthopaedic surgeons to diagnose a patient who may be making up symptoms to fit himself into a diagnosis that he has already read up on. This will bring us back to the concept of 'shared management' where both the patient and doctor will play an almost equal role in the management of their conditions.

Just like how patients can search for information themselves, doctors can also aid them in guiding them to the right websites or applications. Applications such as YouTube can be utilized for the giving out of preoperative, perioperative and postoperative instructions. How many of us have actually asked a patient to look at videos advising on the pre and post-operative care after a total knee replacement. These have clearly aided these patients in making better decisions about their own management.

Looking into the future, I am sure more private social networking websites will be up for the usage of Telemedicine. These websites will allow patients to connect with doctors directly and even share experiences with other patients. Ask any patient and we all know that every patient hates waiting outside the consultation rooms. Telemedicine will be the answer and it is likely that more consults will be occurring out of the doctor's office, reducing waiting times and increasing accessibility for all. The amount of possibilities with telemedicine are limitless for now. I always hate it when the patient exclaims "I waited so long to see him and he saw me in less than 5 minutes just to tell me that I am okay!" All these consults can be managed through telemedicine and social media websites, thus improving satisfaction for both the surgeon and the patients.

Telemedicine can be another tool to aid General Practitioners. A way that I see using Telemedicine will be to reduce referrals from polyclinics for patients who may just want to get a specialist reassurance with regards to their condition. We can see them over video, look at the findings from our GP colleagues and advise them accordingly. Our National Electronic Health Records (NEHR) system has already made their radiographic images accessible to us and a consult like this can help to reduce unnecessary referrals and further use our time to consult other patients who may need more time to understand their conditions.

So does social media only benefit patients and can it benefit us? It has clear benefits on the training and advancement of Orthopaedic surgeons. Shortening the feedback cycle is one way social networking websites can help save physicians time. Posting a clinical question can result in a large-scale opinion in a short period of time. Learning curves can be shortened through shared experiences, ideas, surgical videos and peers can be polled on management of difficult or rare cases. How many of us have used Webinars to improve our training or knowledge and the amazing thing about these is that they allow live question and answer sessions with immediate feedback.

Social media also has increased professional collaboration of Orthopaedic surgeons around the world. After attending a Webinar on Orthobullets, I was able to email a world renowned professor for a chapter in a book he had written. Never would I have been able to come into contact with him other than through the Webinar. Webinars are also a great forum for different orthopaedic trainees to share questions and learn from one another. It clearly adds to the training of trainees and long term advancement of a surgeon as well. We can now collaborate with peers that we may not have had access to earlier regardless of whether they are subject matter experts, opinion leaders or just other orthopaedic surgeons in their own practice anywhere in the world.

Another thing that social media has done for orthopaedic surgeons is the democratization of information. Every orthopaedic surgeon is allowed to share his views on professional forums or websites with equal importance. Clear examples that come to mind will be Orthobullets or VuMedi. Each perspective that is posted receives equal time and spread, irrespective of where or who it is coming from – devoid of the conflicts, politics and order considerations that can permeate other professional forums or conferences. Surgeons on these websites can now expect equal treatment and importance and their privacy can be maintained if they choose to do so. Such power of communication has never been seen before with most juniors being worried about the repercussions of their opinions should they had not been agreed upon.

We must not assume that everything is good with social media. There are always two sides to a coin. There are several risks and limitations associated with the increasing usage of social media in orthopedic surgery. As our social media presence increases, the management of these accounts will become more complicated. Who can forget the recent hacking of Facebook that allowed hackers to access the accounts of 50 million users worldwide? There are several companies who offer services to manage medical social media accounts but the responsibility of the content is ultimately that of the orthopaedic surgeon. Finding the correct balance between maintaining a time – efficient strategy while controlling the quality of content will be increasingly challenging with a more educated patient pool. In addition, all these endeavors have potential patient privacy concerns and comes together with all the medico – legal issues that apply to a situation where a patient data is shared and clinical care is delivered. The recent Singhealth database hacking which involved 1.5 million patients including the Prime Minister was a stark reminder of the dangers of having patient data on a server that is accessible via the internet. At the end of the day, patient privacy and safety are paramount and social medial platforms must be held to the same safety standards similar to the release of a new medical product.

Although there is still some way to go in terms of acclimatizing the medical field at large to the potential advantages and dangers of social media, it is only a matter of time before the technology catches hold and large-scale adoption occurs. The future of social media is bright. For most basic users, the use of online platforms to gain access to new patients and offer online educational content will become routine. From a care delivery standpoint, social media will

improve patient engagement and will also allow remote visits that will save time and possibly money. Social media is currently changing the way we deliver almost every aspect of patient care. Understanding the risks and benefits of this powerful technology is essential for continued success in the current medical environment and Orthopaedic surgeons can be the forerunners in this change should we choose the right leaders or step up ourselves to bring us forward.

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