

Physician behind KevinMD reveals how to leverage social media

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Kevin Pho, MD, founder and editor of the popular physician blog bearing his name, Saturday shared practical insights about how to make a difference in health care through social media at the 2016 AMA Annual Meeting. Learn Dr. Pho's tips for using social media and taking control of your online

reputation before it's defined for you.



Social media's potential to connect with patients

Dr. Pho began his social media journey as a researcher for Google Answers back when Google was just getting off the ground. He answered medical questions that patients posted online. "At first those questions were relatively general," he said, "but then the questions started becoming more personal: 'Doctor, what is causing my abdominal pain?' 'Can you give a second opinion for my husband's cancer diagnosis?'"



“People would upload copies of their lab tests for me to interpret,” Dr. Pho said. “They would get ahold of my email address and email me high resolution images of every body part imaginable.”

Then, Dr. Pho had a realization.

“Patients weren’t getting the information they needed in the exam room,” he said. “I realized how the Internet can play a role in filling that information void.”

In 2004, he started a blog. In the fall of that year there was a major drug recall, and his patients on that medication would call his practice and ask if it had done any permanent damage and if there were any other medications they could take instead.

So he wrote a blog post on the issue and gave suggestions to patients that they could ask their doctors. A few days later, a patient came in and said how much that blog post comforted her and let her know she had other options.

“I sat there stunned, for two reasons,” Dr. Pho said. “The first was that anyone other than my mother was interested in what I had to say online. And the second was that social media had tremendous potential to connect with patients.”

Connecting with and educating patients

Seven out of 10 Internet users look for health information, he said. “It’s the third most popular activity after email and using a search engine.” Specifically, patients are looking for information on diagnosis and treatment options.

“The Internet empowers patients,” he said. But “sometimes the information they read on the Web isn’t

the most reliable.”

For example, “parents who went online to research sleep information for their infants found that fewer than half of websites had accurate information that was consistent with American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines,” he said. “The problem that we face today isn’t so much a lack of knowledge we suffer from a lack of wisdom on the Web.”

“In today’s transparent era when patients have as much access to information as their doctors do, we in health care have to redefine ourselves,” he said. “We need to stop seeing ourselves as gatekeepers of medical and drug information. If we’re to stay relevant, we need to be curators of that information instead.”

Social media gives physicians many opportunities to be the filters that sort out the correct information from the incorrect for their patients, he said. For example, a pediatrician in California, Robert Hamilton, MD, who gives advice to young parents on how to sooth their crying infants, created YouTube videos to allow that information to be accessible in the easiest way possible at the request of his patients.

“More of us are going to be faced with patients who come to us with print-outs from the Internet, information on their mobile devices, and when that happens we’re going to have two choices,” he said. “We can roll our eyes and tell patients not to go online But we have a second choice, and that’s to embrace it ... because it’s going to happen anyway.”

Defining your online reputation

Social media also is a powerful way to define an online reputation. “When it comes to being online in a professional context,” he said, “a lot of doctors I talk to are a little bit apprehensive. They’re scared of making a mistake ... as a result, they don’t go online at all.”

“Patients today aren’t just going online to research their diagnosis and treatment options,” he said, “they’re going online to research their doctors as well.” Dr. Pho suggests googling yourself once a week to see what comes up. “If you don’t have an online presence, when patients Google you, it will show physician rating sites.”

“If you look at every other industry, whether it’s books, movies, hotels, restaurants,” he said, “people want to know what others are thinking ... online ratings are not going away.”

In Texas, a disgruntled patient created a fake website for a physician and filled it with false patient reviews. The physician didn’t know about it until another patient came in and said something was wrong with his website. “It wasn’t [the physician’s] skill as a surgeon or bedside manner that defined

him ... it was in fact his online reputation,” Dr. Pho said.

“When it comes to establishing an online presence, the best way to do so is to create content online,” he said. “About a third of readers will click on the first result [of a search engine query] We need to control those top listings on Google. We need tools that are powerful in the eyes of Google and allow us to create that content online. Those tools are of course available to us; they are social media platforms—blogs, Facebook, twitter, LinkedIn, Youtube.”

“Can you translate your social media skills through the lens of a physician?” Dr. Pho asked. “Not only will patients Google you ... but so will your residency director, your hospital credentialing committee and your future employer.”

“The more social media platforms you engage in, the bigger your online presence will be,” he said. “Establish your online reputation.”

How to do it

Dr. Pho shared a step by step approach to defining yourself online:

- | **Get your bio and headshot first.** These two things are common across social media platforms, and they should include three traits—likeability, trustworthiness and competence. Your headshot should be a high-resolution image that is not cropped from another image, and don’t use a full body shot. Your bio should be a well-written introduction to people who will find you on the Web.
- | **Claim your profile from a physician rating site.** Personalize that page and put in your bio and your headshot. The most visible site is Healthgrades; other options are Vitals, RateMDs and Yelp.
- | **Create a profile on a professional social networking site.** “I like LinkedIn and Doximity,” Dr. Pho said. “A profile on these sites is no more than a digital translation of your CV.”

“Doing all of these things should not take more than a few hours to do,” he said. “And after doing them, stop. Ask yourself, ‘What are my goals for social media?’ Is it educating patients, is it connecting with colleagues, is it advocating for a cause, or is it debating health care reform?”

After gradually becoming more comfortable with your online presence, you can adapt your different social media platforms to these roles, Dr. Pho said. First, listen to what people on Twitter have to say about those subjects you are interested in. Then you will be prepared to share once you feel more comfortable.

“There will be a few that will take the ultimate step and create your own content,” he said. “It could be articles and blogs or videos on YouTube The goal is to dominate the search engine rankings for your name so you’re in control of the information that comes out when patients Google you.”

“The biggest risk of social media is not using it at all in health care,” Dr. Pho said. “We need to realize social media’s power to connect and be heard It’s a responsibility we must embrace; it’s an opportunity we cannot miss. So let’s use social media, change the world and make that difference in health care.”

AMA Wire® sat down with Dr. Pho after his presentation for a few additional questions. Check out the interview on Periscope.