

5 reasons why physicians should use social media professionally

APR 17, 2019

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As social media has moved from a toy of the technorati to a mainstream facet of American life, many physicians have learned how to get the most out of Facebook, Twitter and the like while avoiding some of the ethical pitfalls. But if you're still trying to understand why smart use of social media could help your physician career, AMA member Tyese L. Gaines, DO (@doctorty), has got the answers.

The board-certified emergency physician spent years as a health care journalist, has earned an MBA, recently launched her own urgent-care practice in New Jersey, and offers training to physicians on how to navigate the intersection of medicine and social media. So, if your social media use is restricted to checking in for pictures of friends' children on Facebook, here is Dr. Gaines' perspective on why you should consider engaging more deeply at a professional level.

Build your brand. "You're going to be a brand no matter what. It's just a question of whether you're going to let other folks do it for you, or whether you put things out there on your own and control your own brand," Dr. Gaines said. That doesn't necessarily mean posting 10 times a day to Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and so on, but it does mean finding your niche and seeing what you have to add to the social conversation that is already happening within your specialty or in your local health care community.

"You want to make sure you're up to date on any buzz related to that niche, so that you're posting, writing or commenting and being part of that conversation." Social media is not the only way to do that, but smart use can amplify other brand-building efforts such as speaking engagements, medical journal articles or news media engagements.

Advance your passion. This will be as unique as you are. Dr. Gaines, for example, did a lot of writing and research on health care disparities during her time as a health care editor, and specifically explored matters affecting the African-American community.

“The beauty of social media is that you can reach people who wouldn’t automatically read or digest that information. By using some of the social media tools or hashtags, you can bring your information to a much wider audience than would normally read what you publish” for a physician or medical audience.

As your professional interests change with time, so can the focus of your social media postings. “As long as you are deliberate about it, you can definitely drive something home for a while, and then explore a different passion.”

Teach patients and the general public. Rapid, but thoughtful, reactions to trending medical news stories can be an effective way of doing this.

“We can’t just hide in our offices and wait for patients to come to us to clear up this kind of misinformation,” Dr. Gaines said. “Based on what they’re reading, they may never even get there. This is an extension of our role as physicians to not just treat the patients in our office but the obligation to advance overall knowledge and understanding of health and health literacy.”

Attract patients. While few patients are likely to trace their decision to seek out your practice to a particular social media posting, the overall impression formed by an active social media plan that highlights the physician’s or practice’s role can tip the scales.

“We all know that being a social media expert doesn’t necessarily mean you’re the best doctor, but there’s something to be said for building your presence. You’re showing that you’re involved with the community, and allowing patients to feel like they will be seeing someone who is a trusted voice in health care.”

Publicize research. “There’s a ton of great research that never makes it to the lay public, and social media is absolutely a way” to spread it far and wide. Engaging with and promoting high-quality research on social media also can help educate medical students and aspiring physicians, as well as help reporters and editors who are looking for story ideas to pursue.

“I know some physicians think they can get through their whole career and not deal with social media,” Dr. Gaines said. “And I don’t think it’s mandatory to be on social media to take care of patients. But it’s such an opportunity to broaden your reach as a physician. We have so much knowledge after going through our training. Why limit it to the 40 patients you see a day when you could be reaching thousands of patients a day on social media?”