How podcasts can connect patients, doctors during COVID-19 era

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Podcasts in the age of COVID-19 have become a lifeline for patients and a platform for physician voices. They also are increasing in popularity, with a recent Nielsen report finding that podcast audiences have grown by 40% since 2018. Even before the pandemic, a Nielsen Scarborough survey revealed that 26% of respondents wanted to see more health-related podcasts.

With so much health information out there, it’s critical to elevate facts, science and the physician voice when educating Americans on health and medicine, said Chris Grant, chief operating officer of The Permanente Federation, and host of the “Permanente Medicine” podcast. In a recent episode, Grant spoke with two influential podcasters on the role of podcasts in promoting best practices and guiding patient care.

One of them was Katie Deming, MD. A radiation oncologist with Northwest Permanente in Oregon at the time of recording, she offers advice and emotional support to cancer patients in her “Born to Heal Podcast.

Northwest Permanente is a member of the AMA Health System Program, which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

Keeping it short and sweet

Dr. Deming, who launched her podcast in October 2021, dispenses her advice through “15 minutes of quick bites.” These are little tips for people who need healing, she explained. Her topics reflect things she’s seen patients struggle with over the years in her work as a physician. She listens for common themes based on the questions patients ask in clinic, then crafts an episode that addresses those concerns.

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When it comes to effective doctor-patient communication, it's important that both parties are speaking from a base of shared knowledge. The AMA “What Doctors Wish Patients Knew™ series provides a space where physicians share what they want patients to understand about today's health care headlines.

Compelling research, discussions, opinions and more—enjoy these original podcasts from the AMA for the latest in medicine and patient care.

Addressing COVID-related anxiety

Managing fear is something Dr. Deming addresses quite often in her podcasts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought another layer of concerns among her patients. It’s common for cancer patients to feel afraid.

“Fear and managing fear and how to calm people’s nervous systems is a big part of my job,” Dr. Deming said. That fear has since transferred to the general population, not just those living with chronic conditions, she added.

“They’re afraid of getting COVID, afraid of each other. This pervasive fear in our communities is impacting people’s health,” she said.

Dr. Deming also talked about the importance of social connection. The pandemic disrupted some patients’ ability to connect with other people, which is vital to healing and immune function.

She tries to impart advice on how to be safe while staying connected with loved ones to maintain good health.

While it’s difficult to gauge how a podcast influences people, Dr. Deming has noticed that people coming into clinic to see other doctors have been requesting visits with her, “which has been very fulfilling.”

Learn more from Permanente Medical Group Associate Executive Director Stephen Parodi, MD, about how we will know when COVID-19 has become endemic.