

Advice to Physicians: Tap Into Social Media

Use of blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Web sites to create an online presence can benefit your practice.

BY SALLY KOCH KUBETIN

FROM A SEMINAR ON RHEUMATOLOGY

SANTA MONICA, CALIF. — Social media provide a way for physicians to engage with their patients and the community, whether the physician practices in an HMO or privately, according to Dr. Jeffrey Benabio, a dermatologist at Kaiser Permanente in San Diego.

Moreover, physicians in private practice could find social media useful in building their practices, Dr. Benabio said at a meeting sponsored by Skin Disease Education Foundation and the University of Louisville.

No matter what the specialty, the principles of using social media such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter and Web sites as tools for improving patient care will apply. "Online patient communities are an ascendant means for patients to learn about their disease, and seek advice and comfort from [other] patients like them. Physicians can be part of this conversation and contribute to it. Who better to [advise] patients [on] how to live with pain, live with deformity, deal with insurance companies, than physicians?" noted Dr. Benabio in an interview.

It takes no money but lots of time to build online networks. So why bother to do it? Dr. Benabio offered several reasons.

"Patients are going online to interact with their physicians, and we are not there," he said.

"Physicians are losing [their] status as the sole source of medical knowledge. Whereas patients always had to come to us to learn about disease and health, now they get most of their information online. Our absence online perpetuates a trend of diminishing importance of our profession. Patients are online; physicians need to be where they are," he said.

As with much in life, the secret to being effective online comes down to showing up.

"A physician becomes a trusted member of the community by being present. Over time, regular blog posts, Facebook updates, and Tweets allow the audience to become familiar with the physician, to know that he or she is there, is listening, is part of the community.

"Physicians should blog and have Facebook pages. They should post things that are helpful and informative for their audience. They can report news, but it must be within the law. Physicians can talk about drugs and about non-FDA-ap-

proved uses of drugs as long as they are not giving actual medical advice, and are clear about any disclosures and disclaimers," Dr. Benabio said.

They should Google themselves and see what they find — though they might not like it. The only content you can control is the content you create, he asserted. Google has 400 million queries daily

practice's Web site will have the additional benefit of marketing the practice at the same time you are offering the public a reliable perspective on medical developments within your specialty.

Getting your name out online, making sure it is associated with reliable information, and being available as a caring, informed physician are all effective marketing strategies that are literally at your fingertips in the form of social media tools. Some would say this is becoming the first choice in marketing, and that traditional marketing is dying.

Dr. Benabio warned that others will usurp physicians' role as providers of health information unless they get online to counter that trend. Certainly alternative health providers are on social media, building relationships with patients and boosting their status among patients. Just as a patient who has no access to a dermatologist will see a nurse or naturopath, patients online seek information from nonphysicians, he noted.

Physicians are on a slippery slope in this age of the Internet information highway. "This is a critical time when we are trying to demonstrate our value as practitioners," he said. "The more comfortable people are with nonphysicians, the more difficult it will be for us to fight nonphysicians' expansion of their scope of practice."

SDEF and this news organization are owned by Elsevier. Dr. Benabio disclosed that he is a consultant for Livestrong.com and a full-time employee of the Southern California Permanente Medical Group. ■



To watch an interview on social media with Dr. Jeffrey Benabio, please go to www.rheumatologynews.com.

and 75%-80% of adults have sought medical information online. The nature of information on the Internet is that it is collaborative, and physicians need to be part of that. Otherwise, the public might be offered information that is inaccurate and biased, he said.

"It is as important to be a trusted member of the online community as it is to be a trusted member of your actual community," Dr. Benabio said. Starting a blog and making it part of your

Blitz Web With Content to Protect Your Online Reputation

BY SHERRY BOSCHERT

EXPERT OPINION FROM THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR MOHS SURGERY

MONTEREY, CALIF. — Have you searched for your name on the Internet? Your patients have.

"Your patients are Googling you," and some of them probably are rating your performance as a doctor on one of the many physician-rating sites or generic rating sites, Dr. Clifford Warren Lober said.

Here's the problem: The patients most likely to rate you are those who are livid at you, or those who think you walk on water. And it's not just patients who are posting comments about you, but previous patients, ex-employees, former spouses, or anyone else who knows you, said Dr. Lober, a dermatologist and attorney in Kissimmee, Fla.

Online comments may be made anonymously, persist for years on the Internet, be accessed by anyone with a computer, and be replicated on other Web sites beyond the original. If you discover comments about you that you think are harmful to your reputation, your attempts to remedy the situation may backfire and instead "optimize" the content by bringing more attention to the posted statement, amplifying its negativity, he said.

Legal remedies are few and complicated. "There is a morass of legal defenses and privileges that protect the offending person," Dr. Lober said.

So how best to manage your online reputation? One strategy is to minimize the impact of negative online information by using search-engine optimization.

In practice, this means blitzing the Web with your own content to crowd out comments by others. "You want to occupy the first three pages of the rating sites" and the search-engine results pages if possible, Dr. Lober said, adding that most people don't look beyond the first three pages of results.

This can be done by establishing multiple Web sites, each with numerous internal page links, external high-traffic links, significant content on each of your home pages, and other features that make these the sites that show up when someone searches your name.

Establishing a deep social network presence helps, too. Create accounts on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, ZoomInfo, Connectbeam, Yahoo Profile, Google Profile, MSN Profile, Wetpaint, Nymz, Jigsaw, Ning, and others, he suggested. Ideally, get on sites that feature RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds so that information posted on one site transfers to others.

Other prongs in this strategy include issuing press releases by using Internet publication sites, establishing one or more blogs in your name, and using pay-per-click advertising.

Sound overwhelming? Innovative entrepreneurs thought that it might, so a number of Internet reputation-management companies have formed to do some of this work for you—for a fee, of course. These include companies like Reputation Repair & Management, Internet Reputation Management, and ReputationDefender, Dr. Lober said.

If, instead, you want to try to get a specific offensive statement removed from the Web, seek legal counsel

for guidance, Dr. Lober advised. First, the statement must be determined to meet the legal definition of defamation. If it does, the next step is to determine if the person who wrote it is covered by any one of several standard legal defenses. If that's not an issue, check the terms and conditions listed by the Internet service provider (ISP) of the site where the comment appeared, to see if the ISP made any promises or assurances about the content on the site. If you contact the ISP, it may take the comment down.

Normally, ISPs are immune from lawsuits over statements made by others on its service; they resemble telephone companies more than newspapers in that respect, he said.

You or your lawyer can request that the courts issue a subpoena to try to compel the person who made the statement (even an anonymous poster) to remedy the situation, but this process is time consuming and expensive, and the person who posted the comment may be difficult to locate, Dr. Lober cautioned.

And if you sue, the defendant may try to frame your action as a SLAPP (strategic litigation against public participation) suit intended to muzzle critics and restrict freedom of speech. Some states have anti-SLAPP laws that could leave you paying the defendant's attorney fees and costs, and make you vulnerable to a countersuit by the defendant.

Better to try to "manage" your online reputation than to try to legally defend it, he suggested.

Dr. Lober reported having no pertinent conflicts of interest. ■