

The use of Social Media in Health Systems: Opportunities and challenges

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ABSTRACT

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Social media is the result of web 2.0 which refers to technologies that provide the possibility of user's participation in content creation, sharing information (1), expressing experiences, ideas and thoughts (2) and facilitating communication (3). Social media is frequently and increasingly used in different fields, especially in health (4, 5). This is likely due to the individual abilities of these media to improve the people and organizations' performance compared to other media (6).

According to Media Richness Theory, the best media is the one that has the capacity of transferring multiple media, such as audio, video and text simultaneously, for transferring messages including health messages (4). Mass media has fewer capabilities compared with social media, because mass media has many limitations on personal communication with the audience and getting immediate feedbacks (7, 8). But social media can have more influence on changing attitudes and health behaviors due to the capabilities and facilities, if selected appropriately.

These media can have effective roles in different areas in health systems, for example:

1. Research. Including: review of health texts (9), creating a sense of ownership for user-generated content, improved sharing of health information (1, 2), expanding production of science (8), and enhancing research capabilities of researchers.

2. Education. Including: developing individual and social creativity (7), providing equal opportunities for all people to learn, a place to discuss about hot topics (10), getting feedback from other participants, increasing social competence identifying the youth (8), developing general knowledge in health field (4) improving the people's health (7), and providing better education in clinical departments.

3. Health Information Services. Including: facilitating access to information (6), gathering and disseminating health news (8), increasing public health information such as nutrition, transferring health information in video, audio and text simultaneously, and marketing health information

4. Management. Including: accreditation of companies, institutions and individuals in the health field, access to senior managers, improving internal relationship, expanding health services marketing (4) and participating in social development, such as building hospitals.

5. Social Communication. Including: contributing to mass movements or services, such as earthquakes, floods, etc., establishing online communities (8), forming a group of fans interested in a special fields such as health tourism and AIDS, motivating the users and members of the health different fields (11), monitoring health products and services, and enhancing patient interaction with other patients as well as patients with other people.

In spite of all these potentialities and capabilities provided by social media for the general public, especially health professionals, there are important questions posed by the users, active organizations in the field of media, policy makers and the health authorities. These questions are related to issues such as protection of user information, validation of information and information value (7), intellectual property, convincing the members about the usability and usefulness of the media, the lack of appropriate foundation, anxiety of users about controlling the media by other people's fear and misconceptions about the media (12), and the quantity and quality of impact on family members, mental health, identity and education systems.

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It seems that paying particular attention to health researchers and providing the perfect infrastructure to provide this information in various media, including health journals, can make different aspects of this issue clear so that health administrators can easily use social media in writing strategies and plans in different fields of health.

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