Online Professionalism: Challenges and Opportunities

Ronald R. Burns, DO
Federation of State Medical Boards
Chair Florida Board of Osteopathic Medicine
If Facebook and Twitter were countries

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Users</th>
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<td>India</td>
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Online Professionalism

- All interactions between professionals and the Internet
- Social media act as a mirror for professional values and reflects the best and worst aspects of individuals and their organizations
- A digital footprint

Greysen et al. Online Professionalism and the Mirror of Social Media. JGIM 2010
Challenges

Facebook misconduct: Med students cross line
Some broke confidentiality, tried to ‘friend’ patient online, study shows

Medical students reckless on Internet, sometimes at patients’ expense

For Medical Secrets, Try Facebook
Posting Patient Info Online Could Be Violation of Patient Confidentiality Laws

In 2007, a resident surgeon snapped a picture of a patient’s tattoo — the words shared it with colleagues, making international news when the story was leaked.
Knowledge Gaps

- Are licensing authorities concerned about online professionalism?
- Are state medical boards experiencing complaints?
- Are disciplinary actions occurring as a result?
**Explosive Problem for the University of Louisville – Nursing Student Expelled for MySpace Blog**

March 12th, 2009 · 118 Comments

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**Doctor busted for patient info spill on Facebook**

Though probably inadvertent, physician’s post led to identification of patient

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**Nurses Fired Over Cell Phone Photos Of Patient**

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**Case Referred To FBI For Possible HIPAA Violations**

POSTED: 5:22 pm CST February 25, 2009

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**Hospital employees post patients' pictures on Web site**

ALBUQUERQUE, New Mexico — Two employees of a U.S. hospital have been fired for using cellphone cameras to take photographs of patients who were receiving treatment and then posting the images to a social networking Web site.
Methodology and Response

- Self-administered online survey assessing:
  - 71% of boards responded
  - Respondents:
    - 67% Executive Directors
    - 8% Licensing
    - 17% Investigations
    - 8% Other
92% reported online professionalism violations

- Inappropriate contact with patients (69%)
- Misrepresentation of credentials or clinical outcomes (60%)
- Inappropriate prescribing (63%)

92% reported online professionalism violations

71% held formal disciplinary proceedings

License limitation (44%)
License suspension (29%)
License revocation (21%)

Outcomes of Disciplinary Proceedings

- Letter of reprimand: 48%
- Restriction of license: 44%
- Mandated education: 40%
- Suspension of license: 33%
- Monetary fine: 33%
- Revocation of license: 21%
- Probation: 8%
Types of Violations

- Inappropriate patient communication: 69%
- Misrepresentations of credentials: 60%
- Violations of patient confidentiality: 29%
- Failure to reveal conflicts of interest: 19%
- Derogatory patient remarks: 15%
- Depiction of intoxication: 13%
- Discriminatory language: 10%
How were complaints initiated?

- Patient or patient family member: 65%
- Another physician: 50%
- Discovered during ongoing investigation: 48%
- Other non-physician clinical provider: 33%
- Administors or other non-clinical staff: 21%
- Clinician in training: 8%
Vignettes

1) Patient confidentiality
2) Misinformation on practice website
3) Inappropriate contact with patients
4) Discriminatory or derogatory speech
5) Depicted use of alcohol
Example 1

- A concerned patient reports that her surgeon posted pictures of herself drinking at a hospital Holiday party on Facebook.
Example 2

- A concerned patient reports her physician frequently describes “partying” on his Facebook page which is accompanied by images of himself such as the one below:
ACP-FSMB Position Paper

Online Medical Professionalism: Patient and Public Relationships

- Written and Approved by
  - ACP’s Ethics, Professionalism and Human Rights Committee
  - ACP’s Council of Associates
  - FSMB’s Committee on Ethics and Professionalism

- Approved, FSMB Board of Directors, October 21, 2012
- Approved, ACP Board of Regents, November 17, 2012
- Published, *Annals of Internal Medicine* on April 11, 2013
Online communication has **dramatically increased** but there is **little guidance** on best practices for physicians.

Physicians should consider how to best **protect patient interests and apply principles of professionalism** to new settings.

Striking a balance between **harnessing opportunities while being aware of challenges** in the use of technology is critical.

“Use of online media can bring significant educational benefits to patients and physicians but may also pose ethical challenges.

Maintaining trust in the profession and in patient-physician relationships requires that physicians consistently apply ethical principles for preserving the patient-physician relationship, confidentiality, privacy and respect for persons to online settings and communications.”
“The boundaries between professional and social spheres can blur online.

Physicians should keep the two spheres separate and comport themselves professionally in both.”
E-mail or other electronic communications should only be used by physicians within an established patient-physician relationship and with patient consent.

Documentation about patient care communications should be included in the patient’s medical record.”
“Physicians should consider periodically “self-auditing” to assess the accuracy of information available about them on physician ranking websites and other sources online.”
“The reach of the Internet and online communications is far and often permanent.

Physicians, trainees and medical students should be aware of future implications for their professional lives of online postings and interactions.”
Moving Forward

- Professionalism is a core competency for physicians
- Incumbent upon regulators and physicians to identify and address emerging trends in online practices
- Create standards with broad consensus about what is or is not appropriate online behavior for physicians
  - FSMB’s Model Policy Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Social Media in Medical Practice
- A need for continuing education about the potential consequences of unprofessional actions online
Special Thanks to Research Colleagues:

S. Ryan Greysen, MD, MA (Yale)
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David Johnson, MA (FSMB)