Ethical Aspects of Posting Medical Information with The Public on Social Media Platforms

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Introduction

Social media is an ever-developing arena for growth in various fields that significantly impact healthcare delivery. Several studies suggested that social media and other electronic forms of communication are essential for the healthcare team to advise and familiarize patients with their medical illnesses.\(^\text{(1–4)}\) Social media is considered a bioethics issue that has significant implications for medical practice, research, and public health.\(^\text{(5)}\) However, a significant gap was observed among healthcare providers in the awareness of ethics and legal policies related to the medical field.\(^\text{(6,7)}\) Social media is also contained by several loopholes such as low-quality information, patient privacy breaches, damage to a professional image, and legal and ethical issues.\(^\text{(8)}\) Due to the heavy use of social media among people, we may post online or send photos on social apps, and all it takes is just a push-button, but that is not where it ends. In many cases, it is the beginning. Many doctors have been fired from their job due to the violation of patient privacy. For instance, Dr. Alexandra Thran had been fired from the job and fined with 500$ after being frustrated with trauma patients in Westerly Hospital Emergency Department in Rhode Island. Although the patient's name was not mentioned in her post, the given information was enough to identify the patient.\(^\text{(9)}\) A nursing assistant was also jailed and forced to surrender her nursing certificate due to misconduct by posting graphic images of patients on beds pans.\(^\text{(10)}\) It is crucial to acknowledge that being in a medical profession is a job of privileges and responsibilities. Various international organizations have developed guidelines for socially active health workers such as doctors, nursing, and pharmacists.\(^\text{(11,12)}\) The health care team must be updated with the current medical rules and regulations to demonstrate their professionalism in higher standards. This article will review the main ethical aspects regarding posting medical information to the public on social media.
Ethical Issues of Social Media Usage in Healthcare

Healthcare organizations usually have clear rules and regulations governing the staff’s use of social or electronic media in the workplace. Though outside the workplace is often less clear and mostly, misuse of social media occurs. Ethical issues involve both social media research as well as in the doctor-patient relationship. In the researchers’ case, several points need to be considered, including whether the study is suitable for social platforms and chances of reviewing informed consent several times during the study. Also, protecting the collected data on highly secured firewalls will not be accessible to anyone on social platforms. Confidentiality and privacy are the first ethical issues to be considered. They are sometimes used interchangeably. However, they may have a slight difference. Privacy is related to patient information, whereas confidentiality is in the hand of doctors and other healthcare professionals. Unless these two principles, it is impossible for patients to share or disclose their medical conditions or histories. Patient privacy is a vital part of a patient's expectancy to be treated with respect and dignity. Hence, Medical staff must be familiar with privacy and confidentiality rules to ensure that the procedures and policies conform to the latest medical standards and norms. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), also known as the Kennedy–Kassebaum Act, has been enacted in 2003 by the United States to protect patients' sensitive health information from being revealed to third parties without their consent. HIPAA rules also promote high-quality healthcare while protecting public health and well-being. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is responsible for enforcing HIPAA privacy rules. Healthcare providers should also comply with the ethical codes imposed by their hospitals or institutions. HHS proposed significant changes to HIPAA privacy rules in December 2020. If finalized, the reforms will mainly impact covered
entities, i.e., healthcare clearinghouses, health plans, and healthcare givers that use electronic data. The proposed changes will also have effects on the business associates. Additionally, performing clinical research on social media platforms necessitates high attention to confidentiality, security, and consent. Social media have been used for numerous purposes, such as emotional care and clinical conditions management. Building trustworthiness between health care professionals and customers is also of great importance. There should be clear policies that safeguard the security of patient data. Serious attention should be given to the patients' medical records and should be avoided to disclose to third parties unless their permission. Opposite to patient rights, no such policies being made on the security of data. The Declaration of Helsinki was developed due to several unethical practical experiments carried out in the name of research and science. Most notorious is Dr. Josef Mengele, who carried out series of experiments in the Nazi camps. The participants had severely suffered while the experiments were conducted without their consent. Another tragedy is the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment that ran in the U.S. between 1932 to 1972. As a part of the public health program, many African-Americans were recruited to study syphilis. The participants were not told that they were not being treated for syphilis, but the disease's progress was studied. Some people unnecessarily died, whereas 40 women had caught the disease. Moreover, the study was supposed to take six months but lasted for 40 years. Many other unethical practices had occurred over the past 100 years. It is worth reminding our self the importance of sticking to medical principles.

Conclusion

The biggest challenge for healthcare workers posting on social media is to use the platforms responsibly and thoughtfully in both private and their work. Although ethical and legal guidelines always lag behind technological advances, we have these days evolving principles and procedures addressing confidentiality, privacy, professional reputation, and many others discussed in the article. Any inappropriate use of social and electronic media of unethical and unprofessional practice will result in possible disciplinary actions, e.g., firing from a job, suspending a license, charging fines, etc. Most of the social media infarctions arise from unintentional misuse. Healthcare workers
should avoid taking photos, videos, or recognizable data of their patients using cell phones. By vigilantly following standardized guidelines, healthcare workers can responsibly use social media to enhance patient care coordination. Although there are burgeoning ethical and legal enforcements worldwide, Arab countries' health authorities need to create awareness among their healthcare professionals to promote high-quality care. Moreover, Arab researchers are recommended to highlight the ethical loopholes in their countries to overcome ethical limitations in terms of scope and volume.

References

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