

COURAGE TO CARE

A Health Campaign of Uniformed Services University, www.usuhs.edu, and the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, Bethesda, Maryland, www.CSTSonline.org

THE DOCTOR-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP: *Opportunities and Risks of New Communication Technologies*

The doctor-patient relationship is the most important component of ongoing care. It is the basis of medical practice, sustaining care, providing comfort, relief of pain, and the basis of the patient's trust in their care. While patients have always talked with their physician and health care providers in person, they now can "talk" via telephone, email, Twitter, texting, and teleconferencing.

Wide arrays of communication technologies have evolved to now become integral components of modern healthcare delivery. A number of tools and applications are poised to change the way physicians and patients interact, and in that way potentially change the nature and quality of the doctor-patient relationship. The internet, social networking, and smart phones can complement, and even

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extend, healthcare communications that once ceased at the end of an office encounter. Now, with ever-expanding ways to share, military and civilian populations alike are expanding access and have the potential for ongoing communication, support, and information sharing beyond the traditional medical settings.

Service members and their families face the challenge of maintaining continuity of medical care in the context of frequent relocation, post-deployment health issues, and the evolving changes with systems of care. As a component of our new mobile health, E-communication tools can bridge gaps and facilitate our navigation of complex and, oftentimes, changing systems.

Dedicated Medical Websites

Many medical practices have their own websites that offer information and services to enhance communication and care. These websites are particularly well suited to address the needs of proactive patients who often prefer online communication opportunities. Features often include:

- Professional practitioner bios, medical services, and specialties
- Office hours, location, and directions
- Patient portals to facilitate downloading/filling out of forms: registration, insurance, parental consent, privacy policy, and authorization to release one's medical information
- FAQs for general information such as: seeking medical attention when the office is closed, new patient information, cancellation policies, and Medicare and insurance related information
- Resources: doctor-recommended resources to learn more about medical conditions and organizations, local, state, and national

Doctor-Patient Communication Options/Preferences

Reports indicate that patients and medical professionals alike want to improve medical communications, *however, both parties must decide on the best tools to use*. A patient's willingness to expand communication with their health care professional can be potentially advantageous for all, creating an atmosphere that improves health outcomes.

Options for health care practitioners to expand communications include:

- **Email** — Specific guidelines for patients and practitioners are recommended when using email. This method requires both compliance with the healthcare provider's parameters, as well as agreement between doctor and patient regarding its use. *Emails should not be used in emergency situations, only for general questions.*
- **Patient Portals** that use Personal Health Record Systems — Allows patients to more actively participate in their health care, which may be a significant factor in improving health outcomes. Provides a secure environment to engage health records and information.

Continued

- *Guidelines surrounding use of patient portals vary and are posted on the health provider's website.*
- **Videoconferencing** — Interactive programs that support visual as well as voice interaction such as Skype, telemedicine initiatives, and video chats are especially helpful for patients who are homebound or living in rural or remote locations. *Attention must be paid to state licensing regulations unless the interaction takes place in a DoD or VA facility.*
- **Social media** — Web and mobile-based technologies including Facebook, Google+, Twitter, and LinkedIn enable individuals to connect with larger communities for information exchange and support. *In serving healthcare needs, social media raises many questions explored in the next section.*
- Maintaining “new” professional boundaries
- Patient privacy and HIPAA implications
- User-generated content (social media sites) increases risk of inaccurate/problematic information
- Legal issues include medical information privacy, lack of standards for online care, and medical licensing when using telemedicine technologies that cross state lines.

Summary

New e-communication tools designed to enhance doctor-patient communications offer many benefits for today's tech savvy and mobile population. Many of these tools can reduce administrative costs and increase time spent on patient care. In addition to being knowledgeable about risks, medical professionals must stay abreast of various medical professional society guidelines and work to ensure these tools continue to enhance, and not hinder, essential medical communications.

Risks and Challenges

A variety of new technologies are available for establishing and maintaining doctor-patient relationships. Use of such communication methods requires thoughtful consideration of the benefits and potential risks for delivering care. Areas of concern include:

Medical Professionals and Social Media Guidelines

Medical professionals who decide to use Social Media should review employer and professional society guidelines; but be aware that base focus is on how to avoid problems...not necessarily how to employ media and advance the healthcare of your patients. There are solid reasons, however, why physicians should consider engaging in social media and these include expanding partners and collaborators, propagating accurate medical information, and broadening professional horizons. Physicians who want to share peer-reviewed medical information, appropriate to their specific patient population, can easily “retweet” from a broad array of governmental and professional sources, and, in this way, serve as a trusted resource to patients, by bringing expertise to bear on healthcare issues, and by pointing people toward accurate and reliable resources.

Reliable Resources include:

<https://twitter.com/CDCgov>
<https://twitter.com/aafp>
https://twitter.com/JAMA_current
<https://twitter.com/NEJM>
<https://twitter.com/NIHClinicalCntr>

Federation of State Medical Boards: Model Policy Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Social Media and Social Networking in Medical Practice

<http://www.fsmb.org/siteassets/advocacy/policies/social-media-and-electronic-communications.pdf>

AMA Policy: Professionalism in the Use of Social Media

<https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/ethics/professionalism-use-social-media>

Courage to Care is a health promotion campaign of Uniformed Services University and its Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS). CSTS is the academic arm and a partnering Center of the Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.



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