

## POINT

## For Pete's Sake, Think Twice Before Tweeting Your Political Views

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***TMI (Too Much Information): Information more personal than anyone wants or needs to know. A common problem on the Internet.***

—The Urban Dictionary

**W**e are battling a severe increase in TMI in the Digital Age. I regrettably have seen an aging acquaintance's Facebook profile photo featuring said acquaintance wearing only Coppertone and a mankini. My visual cortex is forever scarred. That's a micrometer of precious cortical real estate that I'll never get back. What does this have to do with SGIM members tweeting (or posting on the Internet by any other means) their political views? Well, TMI, when applied to physicians, takes on a whole new meaning:

*TMI (for physicians): Information more personal than any patient wants or needs to know. A common problem on the Internet.*

Let's take Pete, a middle-aged patient who has seen you for a couple of years and decides to Google your name one day to look up your office phone number. He comes across your Twitter page and delights in reading your tweets from the past few months—that is, up until he comes across your politically charged tweets, which reflect views that are the opposite of his. Hmm. Pete is disturbed. He's conflicted by liking you—your bedside manner, your promptness in returning his messages—and hating your politics. Will this change your relationship? Can he get past the politics?

We have professional boundaries to protect the patient-physician relationship. I'd bet that most physicians would not discuss a political issue in the exam room unless the patient brought it up first and then

only with the most delicate touch. Why? Because politics, as we know, can be inflammatory, polarizing, and deeply personal—qualities that don't exactly translate into a positive therapeutic encounter. Publicizing our political views on the Internet forever entwines (operative word here is *forever*) our digital identity with a political identity, exposing the public and our patients to those views through a digital billboard. At least in the clinical setting, research has found that physician self-disclosures do not seem to help patients and in some cases are actually disruptive.<sup>1</sup> What about in the online world where anyone can see your disclosures?

Besides being TMI and a potential disruptive influence on the patient-physician relationship, there's also another pesky issue to consider—our jobs. Many institutions have political activity policies that restrict physician involvement in political activities while at the workplace and/or outside the workplace when acting as a representative of the organization. Political activities can include endorsing political candidates or causes by whatever definition the institution sets. Certainly, as individuals, we are free to exercise our civil liberties, participate in political activities, and advocate for our patients in the ways we see fit *outside* of our workplaces. The tricky part is understanding the clear division between work-related and non-work-related online activities. Would our employers approve?

But perhaps the answer here is a bit more nuanced. We've seen that

the debates on issues of health care reform have been informed by the views of physicians—these voices have helped shape the debate and added critical perspective. Clearly, I'm not saying that we physicians should steer clear of advocacy work or avoid efforts to improve the health of our community and of our country. Much of our work, after all, is inspired by and aligned with these goals, fueled by an ethical commitment to the populations we serve. For some, this may take the form of publicly supporting legislation that aligns with our professional mission, including leveraging social media for political action. Others may choose more conventional ways to participate in the political process with equal strength and conviction. The key is to consider how our social media activity might impact our professional boundaries, our patient-physician relationships, our relationships with colleagues, and our institutions.

As individual citizens, we have the right to political free speech. Yet, as physicians, we also hold the responsibility of aligning this right to our professional ethical commitments. Tweeting or posting on other social media sites about our political views is essentially a public endorsement. Weighing one's individual comfort level and ethical responsibilities, as well as the potential impact of disclosures on our work relationships—including your clinic patient Pete—should be carefully considered before hitting "Tweet."

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*Postscript:* Katherine Chretien and Anna Reisman agree they could have argued either viewpoint on this interesting and complex issue.

### Reference

1. McDaniel SH, Beckman HB, Morse DS, et al. Physician self-disclosure in primary care visits:

enough about you, what about me? Arch Intern Med 2007; 167(12):1321-6.

*SGIM*