CONVERSATION

SOCIAL MEDIA:
ARE YOU CONFLICTED?

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Tiffany: Good morning, Gaetan! Having just checked my Instagram feed and Twitter for the latest #FOAMed (free open access medicine) news and pearls, I couldn’t help but notice the occasional product advertisement or self-promotion. Physicians are carving out side gigs and businesses that complement their clinical jobs and/or transition to entirely non-clinical jobs, sometimes working in a non-health care industry altogether. Also, Instagrammable moments are harder to pass up for bigger and broader swaths of generations. So here’s the next conversation starter: where should the ethical line be drawn between the clinical practice of medicine—and our Hippocratic oaths to patients’ health and well-being—and modern physician work or leisure that involves social media?

Gaetan: Greetings, Tiffany. What a timely topic. Maybe you noticed that last week, I was invited by a Twitter friend to post one photo (without people or explanations) per day for seven days, and to invite a new friend to participate with each post. And didn’t you join in with a photo of one of those lovely Amsterdam canals? It’s a modern take on the chain letter format that was popular when I was a kid, only now I’m a physician with a “professional” Twitter profile that identifies me as a “clinician and educator.” That’s the kind of bio that makes me think twice about posting glamor shots of cheesesteaks and hoagies (as I might have in my younger days). And then there’s the related issue of physicians’ relationships to industry. I think all of this falls under the heading of “professionalism,” and raises questions about the images we project and the influence we wield on social media.

Tiffany: Indeed, I joined in and chain tweeted, posting a photo at dusk from Ghent, Belgium (#nofilter)!

More importantly, you’ve raised a key part of the conflict here: professionalism. As physicians, we practice: professionalism. As physicians, we practice a profession, meaning we are experts who are specially trained in a particular field and are expected to abide by certain social and behavioral norms that reflect the expertise we practice. Related to this is also the ethical and moral obligation for physicians to disclose conflicts of interest, even—or especially—when those conflicts potentially are ones created on their own. Consider, for example, the history of pharmaceutical companies’ influence on physicians’ prescribing behaviors and, in turn, their effect on patient care, outcomes, and related costs. Could using social media make us more vulnerable to behavioral nudges, conflicts of interest, and consequent unintended effects on patient care?

Gaetan: I don’t know that social media necessarily invites conflicts of interest as much as it may amplify ones that already exist, but I’m more interested in the professionalism question. You mentioned #FOAMed, the twitter hashtag for Free Open Access Medicine, which is emblematic of a major shift in the way doctors receive and share information. Platforms like Twitter have allowed physicians to circumvent traditional channels—like the peer-reviewed publication process—to communicate directly with each other and the general public. This feels like a mostly positive development; it seems like every day someone is giving Grand Rounds on how to leverage Twitter to advance careers in academic medicine. But the open access model has some potential drawbacks. For an impulsive and often impassioned tweeter, the lack of editorial oversight is a bit frightening. On one hand, I’m free to offer an unlimited quantity of unsolicited advice and opinion. On the other, we’re all just one poorly-considered post away from undermining our professional standing. One question is how much...
What responsibilities and positions should we be taking as a community to ensure the veracity and integrity of all that #FOAMed along with the (mis)information out there?

Gaetan: Well it doesn’t sound like either of us are willing to give up the #FOAMed or Twitter, so how about “Tweet like your patients are watching.” (Because they are.)

References