

Social Media as a Learning Resource for Medical Students

C.E. Redmond¹, R. Crawford², D.C. O'Neill³, M.J. Lee³

1. Department of Radiology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.
2. Department of Medicine, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.
3. Department of Radiology, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.

Dear Editor,

Social media are used by an overwhelming majority of today's "digitally native" medical students; a recent survey found that 98% of responding medical students reported using social media¹. The widespread adoption of social media is gradually influencing the undergraduate medical educational landscape in Ireland. Medical educators are recognising the potential pedagogical value of social media as a method to engage with medical students, facilitate learner collaboration and promote useful educational content. We believe the use of social media for the education of medical students is a positive initiative and wish to commend the many medical educators who are proactive members of an expanding online medical education community. However we wish to highlight several considerations for medical students using this relatively novel educational tool that we believe are of importance:

Medical educational content available on social media platforms is not subject to peer review and is of variable quality. It is therefore incumbent upon learners to be judicious in selecting suitable sources of medical educational content on social media and to critically analyze content. Content should be provided transparently by an identifiable medical educator who has relevant expertise and supports their content with references as appropriate.

The opportunity presented by social media to enhance learner engagement is certainly one to be welcomed. The presence of medical educators on social media can however lead to blurring of professional-personal boundaries. Online interaction between medical students and medical educators should be as respectful and appropriately formal as interaction in the classroom setting.

It is essential that medical students are aware of the necessity for responsible and ethical conduct while they use social media. Patient privacy and confidentiality must be maintained at all times. Social media are public forums therefore medical students should be cognisant that unprofessional conduct by future doctors can negatively impact on patients' perception of the medical profession.

In this regard, medical educators have a responsibility to help students understand the importance of professionalism while using social media. The most recent guide to professional conduct and ethics issued by the Medical Council of Ireland contains a new section on the issues for Doctors pertaining to social media². The Irish Medical Organisation has also issued a position paper on social media usage by Doctors³. We believe that the sensible advice in these documents is also applicable to medical students and we encourage students to reflect on them. The integration of formal teaching on online professionalism in to Irish medical curricula may be beneficial and warrants consideration: For instance, Gomes et al. recently reported on the experience at a US medical school with the delivery of a new educational session on professionalism and social media⁴. They observed that 64% of responding students had reported changing their social media behaviour as a result of participating in the session.

In summary, while social media can be used to enhance medical education, it is important that medical students are adequately supported and guided on the appropriate use of social media as a learning resource.

Corresponding Author:

Dr Ciaran E. Redmond
Department of Radiology,
University of British Columbia,
11109-2775 Laurel St,
Vancouver,
BC,
Canada.
Email: ciaran.redmond@vch.ca

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