Social media: managing the ethical issues

Citation metadata

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Date: September-October 2013
From: MedSurg Nursing (Vol. 22, Issue 5)
Publisher: Jannetti Publications, Inc.
Document Type: Article
Length: 2,816 words

Main content

Article Preview:

"Social media is a generalized term for a group of online software tools that allow for increased interaction, authorship, and development of online content by any web user" (Kuhns, 2012, p. 4). Social media include the well-known sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, but also wikis, blogs, microblogs, podcasting, and other social networking and social bookmarking sites (see Figure 1 for definitions and examples). The first goal of this article is to introduce social media and outline ethical issues surrounding their use for medical-surgical nurses. A second goal is to identify existing guides from professional and regulatory associations that nurses can use to navigate social media ethically.

Social media are changing the way people and organizations communicate. The social media statistics are amazing: Facebook has 751 million monthly active users, with 79% outside the United States and Canada (Facebook, 2013). Twitter now has almost 555 billion registered users, with an average of 58 billion tweets per day (StatisticBrain, 2013). Why do nurses need to become familiar with social media?

Patients and their caregivers are searching online for medical information and seeking support; 60% of patients now seek both support and information online. Looking for health care information is the third most popular online activity, after Internet search and email. When 3,014 survey participants were asked to think about the last time they hunted for health or medical information, 77% of these online health seekers said they began at a search engine, such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013). Clearly these survey participants reflected the fact that one in three American adults go online to research their medical conditions. These statistics go beyond millennials (born 1982-2004), who have lived with computers and Internet all their lives; they also include baby boomers as the fastest growing age group of persons using social media tools, with over 51% using some form of social media (Pew Research Center & American Life Project, 2011). Clearly patients and families are using this technology routinely. Therefore, nurses have an obligation to understand this use and find ways to bring these technologies into the health care arena for safe use.

Ethical Issues with Social Media

The simplicity with which personal information can be distributed for public scrutiny presents grave challenges to privacy and professionalism. The unregulated nature of the Internet allows the possibility of unintended self-disclosure by nursing professionals and possible violations of confidentiality laws. Therefore, prior to engaging in social media platforms, all nurses should clearly understand the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and how to avoid possible privacy ethical violations.

HIPAA introduced the term protected health information (PHI) and established rules on how to protect this information (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2003). This Privacy Rule protects all "individually identifiable health information held or transmitted by a covered entity, whether electronic, paper, or oral" (p. 3). Two ways to include actual patient information in a social media platform are acceptable to HIPAA. A patient...

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