Tweeting, posting, and Yammering: The role of social media in the OR

When a chef at a local café decided to donate a kidney to a work colleague on dialysis, staff at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit saw a public education opportunity. The public followed the donor and recipient surgery on Twitter, and local media covered the event.

“It was a good opportunity to educate the community about transplantation,” says Gwen Gnam, RN, MSN, surgical service administrator at Henry Ford.

“It’s a new way of reaching out to a younger generation and telling them how important organ donation is.” Henry Ford, which has 30 ORs and performs more than 19,000 cases each year, has now Twittered 4 surgical procedures, including a robotic hysterectomy and an “awake” craniotomy.

Twitter is just one type of social media ORs and hospitals are using. Blogger Ed Bennett, a hospital web manager at the University of Maryland Medical Center, Baltimore, says 391 hospitals use social networking tools, including 284 Twitter accounts, 203 Facebook pages, and 44 blogs.

Of course, this is still a small percentage of hospitals, but interest in social media for health care is spreading faster than the flu. In fact, you can now track and report outbreaks of infectious diseases such as the flu by using an iPhone application from Children’s Hospital Boston. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention launched a social media campaign for H1N1 flu at www.cdc.gov/SocialMedia/Campaigns/H1N1/index.html.

The campaign includes Facebook, Twitter, online videos, and ecards. And in October 2009, Washington, DC, was the site of a national conference on social media in health care.

So should an OR leader open a Twitter account, launch a blog, and post a YouTube video? What can social media do for your surgical program and your patients, and what potential pitfalls should you keep in mind?

Upside of social media

Social media like Twitter is changing the way hospital staff and patients and their families communicate. For instance, at Children’s Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, surgeons performed plastic surgery on a 10-year-old boy from Mongolia, giving his neck, badly burned during a fireworks accident, greater range of motion.

While the surgical team operated, a public information representative posted live updates on Twitter to keep the child’s father, back in Mongolia, informed. The mother read the tweets in the waiting room, and anyone who followed the Twitter feed could read them too, including students interested in the surgery.

Other hospitals that have tweeted surgeries include Children’s Medical Center in Dallas and St Luke’s Hospital in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.
An education tool

Twitter combined with video feed is an excellent education tool, says Phil Baumann, RN, who Twitters and blogs about technology at http://philbaumann.com. Baumann is CEO of CareVocate, LLC, which helps organizations optimize their web presence.

“Residents and medical students watching a live video while monitoring the Twitter stream can note key events of the procedure,” says Baumann.

When Henry Ford broadcast and Twittered the awake craniotomy, medical students from Michigan to Massachusetts tuned in.

Experts say the surgical team needs to keep focused on the patient and not get distracted by Twitter. An additional clinician or a public affairs officer usually sends the tweets.

What if serious complications occur during surgery? Gnam says Henry Ford’s plan is to tweet a message such as, “Due to a situation in the OR, we will have to suspend tweeting.” Baumann suggests that if the family members are in the hospital watching a live feed, someone should be with them in case of complications.

An aid to marketing

Social media expands the reach of the OR and the hospital. Lee Aase, manager for syndication and social media at the Mayo Clinic and head of Social Media University, Global, cites the example of the system’s venture into podcasts in 2005. When iTunes chose to feature the Mayo Clinic on its home page, Aase says, “We saw our downloads go from 900 to 24,000 per month.

“The experience helped to make the case for communicating directly with patients instead of waiting for mainstream media to do a story,” he adds. “The most you can get on TV is about 90 seconds, but you can have a good in-depth discussion with social media. People who have a medical condition really want that.”

The Mayo Clinic has a website, blogs, Facebook and YouTube pages, podcasts, and a Twitter feed, although it has not used Twitter for surgery yet.

For OR managers who want to explore social media options, Aase recommends contacting their public relations staff.

“You want to figure out what you want to accomplish strategically,” he says. “Understand the tools and what they are capable of and go from there.”

Social media for staff

Nurses can use social media to stay on top of the latest health care developments, says Baumann. For example, there are blogs where nurses can read and participate in discussions about research reports and clinical issues. Nurses can also use Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds to receive daily updates from key websites. Twitter Chats are great ways to exchange information. Learn more at www.twitip.com/tweeting-with-your-twitter-community-how-to-participate-in-a-twitter-chat/.

First, however, nurses need education. To train staff on Twitter, Aase runs hour-long training sessions called “Tweet Camp.” Mayo Clinic staff and public participants can access the camp by webcast or by audio conference call combined with web-based content. The format “helps to illustrate for our staff the reach of Twitter and how it can enable us to reach a large com-
munity in a very short time,” says Aase. On the last Twitter session, more than 100 people from outside Mayo participated from as far away as The Netherlands.

One way to find what you need more easily is to use #hashtags to search Twitter, says Baumann. #hashtags narrow the search by identifying a common word used by those interested in a particular topic. For example, searching for #diabetes instead of simply diabetes will guide you to entries that emphasize diabetes as a main topic instead of listing every time diabetes is mentioned.

**Consent and confidentiality**

It’s important to be cautious when using social media. Clinicians must adhere to legal and regulatory issues such as consent and adherence to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) privacy rules.

At Henry Ford, patients sign the standard video consent form when Twitter or any video is used. Short clips of video taken during the surgery may be posted on YouTube, but no patient identifying features are shown.

“Most issues are covered by existing policy,” says Aase, noting that HIPAA-related policies refer to email and, by extension, to company blogs. Sharing Mayo Clinic, a blog that links Mayo Clinic’s social networking efforts, gives employees guidelines for posts at http://sharing.mayoclinic.org/guidelines/for-mayo-clinic-employees/. Firewalls protect blogs containing more sensitive information from public viewing.

Staff also need to know that they cannot violate HIPAA rules on their own website or blogs. “If you wouldn’t be able to say it in an email or say it publicly, you probably shouldn’t do it on the web,” advises Aase.

**Ground rules**

What about the fear of staff accessing Facebook and other social networking sites on the job? Gnam says, “The ground rules are very clear about what is appropriate.” Anything written or posted on the hospital’s computers belongs to the hospital, as stated when someone logs into the system. “We feel the Internet is a valuable source of information,” she says.

Not every hospital has the same stance, according to Aase, who says that about half of US businesses block access to the Internet.

“I think that’s counterproductive,” he says. “If you have OR staff who are spending too much time on these sites, that’s a management issue, not a social media issue.”

Baumann agrees, saying, “It makes sense for hospitals to have policies as to how social media is used, but banning it is not the right approach. People will use mobile devices if they want to, and there is the cultural effect of sending the message of ‘we don’t trust you.’”

Proponents of banning social networking point to a recent study from the United Kingdom of 1,460 workers that claimed the practice cost businesses 1.4 billion pounds (about $2.25 billion US) a year. Baumann counters that whether staff members speak face-to-face or on Twitter or Facebook, “People are going to socialize. It’s a natural, healthy part of the work environment.”

He emphasizes that those who write the policies must first understand social media so guidelines are appropriate.

Banning access could also affect staff recruitment. According to an Australian study, nearly half of employees who use MySpace and Facebook during work hours would turn down a job offer from a potential employer that banned such sites.
Aase points out that bans mean employees “miss an opportunity to hear patients’ stories that motivate them” because Mayo Clinic employees can read touching stories from patients who share their experience on the hospital’s blog.

The future

Twitter in its current form is only the beginning, according to Baumann. “Twitter is like the invention of the wheel. It’s basic, but it’s a fundamental breakthrough.” He sees a robust future for new applications based on Twitter, including nurses using such a product to “twitter” their patient notes (on a secure system) at the bedside, retrieving data, and simply creating more synergy among systems.

To take advantage of all that Twitter and other social media have to offer, Baumann says hospitals need to invest in cultural change. “Nurses aren’t necessarily the most tech savvy people,” he admits, “but technology is the future of health care.”

A January 2009 Pew study noted that 35% of adults have a profile on an online social networking site, with 75% of those aged 18 to 24 having a profile. According to another study, 53% of nursing schools integrate Web 2.0 tools, including blogs and podcasts, into their curricula, with 58% of nursing schools planning to use these tools in their curricula in the upcoming year.

“The underlying principle is that these [social media] are really powerful communication tools, and health care is all about communication,” says Aase.

—Cynthia Saver, RN, MS

Cynthia Saver is a freelance writer in Columbia, Maryland.

References


Yammer: A new social media tool

Health care organizations such as the Mayo Clinic are testing an externally hosted service called Yammer.

“Yammer is a combination of Twitter and Facebook,” says Lee Aase, manager for syndication and social media at the Mayo Clinic and head of Social Media University, Global. “It’s not limited to 140 characters, and there’s no formatting; it’s like a group internal blog.”

According to Yammer’s website (www.yammer.com), the product includes “enterprise microblogging,” where employees exchange updates on what they are working on, a company social network, a discussion board, and groups. Employees can stay connected through mobile devices such as BlackBerry or iPhone.

Aase says groups such as an OR staff could use Yammer. The tool’s internal focus (unlike Twitter) and security makes it possible to keep confidential information on it, though Mayo doesn’t use it for individual patient data. Basic Yammer service is free; organizations can pay the company to get more control over their network.

Social media resources

Social networking sites
www.facebook.com
www.Myspace.com
www.Twitter.com
www.YouTube.com
www.LinkedIn.com:
A network for connecting with other professionals

#RNchat and blog
Check out Phil Baumann’s list of 140 health care uses for Twitter at http://philbaumann.com/2009/01/16/140-health-care-uses-for-twitter/
—http://twitter.com/PhilBaumann

Found in Cache
Subtitled “Notes from Ed Bennett,” a hospital web manager, this site is an excellent resource for tracking use of social media in health care.
—http://ebennett.org

Social Media University, Global (SMUG)
Free courses in topics ranging from blogging to Yammer.
—http://social-media-university-global.org/curriculum/