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Social Media – the growing role in urology

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The Social Media (SoMe) has revolutionized the way we communicate, interact and live. It has evolved from a purely entertainment role, into a powerful platform for sharing information, instant messaging, networking and bringing communities and societies together. Over the last few decades, SoMe has demonstrated a growing role in medicine. With an unlimited spread of scientific knowledge, the possibility of scientific interaction during medical conferences and medical education, as well as, easy access to international medical debates has made SoMe become an important factor in medicine and especially in urology. The urology community has foreseen the tremendous potential of SoMe, especially with the use of Twitter, which has led to the rapid adaptation of SoMe for conference use, dissemination of breaking news, emerging research, education and socializing.

Recently, Twitter considered one of most dominant platforms has demonstrated an expanding role in scientific discussion, surgical news and conferences not only in urology, but also in other surgical specialties [1]. As authors of the article published in this issue of the CEJU [2], we have observed that the platform of Twitter has allowed for following publications, renowned urologists, creating discussion groups and forums on topics of interest in urology. In addition, we cannot forget of the important role of Twitter for the evaluation activity of international urology meetings .

Twitter has altered the way we perceive a urological conference. Every major event has a dedicated hashtag, which brings all the conference information together, adding a new layer of interaction amongst delegates, and shortening the distance between opinion leaders and their audience. Taking part in discussion following a lecture has never been easier, as asking a question does not require stepping forward to the microphone any longer. Chairmen

of sessions are encouraged to follow the Twitter feeds, select relevant issues for discussion and forward them to the lecturer to facilitate the debate.

Multiple leading urological journals have adopted SoMe as an addition to the traditional publication process, to enhance the exposure of research that is of interest to the readers. Interestingly, a Twitter profile was found to be associated with nearly a two-fold higher impact factor of the journal [3].

Individual researchers may employ SoMe to spotlight their own research, either published in a peer-reviewed journal, or self-published using the ResearchGate or their personal scientific blog. The readers may then disseminate the data further, comment on the outcomes creating a valuable scientific discussion and finally generate a ‘social-review’ of the paper.

The SoMe provides unique opportunities to disseminate medical information to a large audience making them valuable campaigning instruments. Both Facebook and Twitter witnessed numerous urology campaigns aimed at raising the awareness of symptoms of numerous conditions like hematuria (#redalertwc), testicular tumors (#feelingnuts, #lapjaja) or prostate cancer (#fathersday). Furthermore, the SoMe was also heavily involved in a gender equality campaign aiming to protest against the male surgeon stereotypes (#ILookLikeASurgeon, #ILookLikeAUrologist).

There is an ongoing debate whether networks like WhatsApp and Viber fall under the SoMe definition. But it is a fact that the highly popular instant messaging apps are used not only as peer-to-peer connection, but also as group chat applications. As of February 2016, WhatsApp had a user base of one billion, making it the most popular messaging application and the second largest network worldwide [4]. Users can send text messages, documents, images, video, user location and audio messages

with these applications and it is obvious that it is also highly popular amongst healthcare professionals. It is used to debate procedures, diagnosis and research outcomes.

On various platforms it is discussed whether these networks meet the privacy standards. This is the main reason as to why WhatsApp recently added encryption to their software.

Can we use public SoMe content for the purpose of medical research? This is one of the most debated questions today. In our opinion, data mining and monitoring these networks provide unique research opportunities, and will continue to contribute as a relevant factor in the future of science. Nonetheless we still need to evaluate the true scientific

potential of SoMe data acquisition, compared to traditional tools, like surveys, particularly with regard to data quality and bias. The data acquired through SoMe could not only be utilized by clinicians and researchers, but also national and international health agencies or organizations. Social media networks are also increasingly used by patients with urological conditions and patient communities to share their thoughts and problems, as well as to connect with other patients, their families and healthcare professionals. This phenomenon not only helps to solve numerous problems of our patients, but also facilitates education of the society and fight against stereotypes associated with diseases like cancer, which prevent many patients from seeking early specialist advice.

References

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