

Seeking Social Solace

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Patients disclose serious medical diagnoses online.

We are all aware of the dramatic rise of online social networks as communication tools for organizations, though some industries are finding it easier than others to get on board. Healthcare leaders, communicators and educators for example, are not ignorant about the frequency and abundance of conversations on medical issues being held in social forums. Many, however, remain reluctant to interact with stakeholders within these very public circles.

Russell Herder recently released a report entitled, *Seeking Social Solace: How Patients Disclose Serious Medical Diagnoses Online*. Based on research the firm conducted, the paper revealed that not only are many U.S. healthcare consumers seeking health information online, they often use social media as a means to disclose illness, seek support and reach out to others who have experienced similar health issues. The study finds that blogs are the most popular channel for disclosing medical diagnoses, followed by online message boards and then Facebook and Twitter. Several observations were offered.

First, healthcare and medical entities must go where their patients are. Given the growing demand for online access to health-related information and support, organizations should provide? or lead patients to?the kinds of online resources they seek.

Consumers? apparent proclivity to disclose an illness, relatively soon after diagnosis, may underscore the need for immediate emotional support. Providers should ensure they are providing appropriate access to support for patients and their loved ones on all levels.

The rise of health support groups on Facebook, individual websites on Caringbridge.com and blogs dedicated to chronicling one?s personal health journey, is a testament of the willingness of those diagnosed with serious illnesses to share their experience and lend support to others. There is an opportunity to leverage this network of mentors to assist others in the healing process.

There may be opportunities to develop new online resources for patient communities that are relatively underserved in the digital realm such as those for prostate or lung cancer. Given the significant incidence rates of these diseases, the study found a disparity in the availability of web-based resources compared to illnesses such as breast cancer and diabetes. With fewer destinations available, forums through which affected patients can connect may be embraced.

The language recently diagnosed patients use when discussing their illnesses online suggests the need for provider communication that is understanding and compassionate. While consumers may primarily look to health professionals for technical advice about their diagnoses and treatments, and more often call upon friends, family and fellow patients for emotional support, tonality reflective of true-patient-centered care should be considered in verbal and written

communication.

Lastly, when it is decided it is time to get online, it is always important to understand the boundaries. It is not unusual for those with chronic health issues and long-term medical problems to build close relationships with care providers. Should a nurse, for instance, accept a Facebook "friend" request from a grateful cancer patient? The legal, ethical and practical issues that emerge can be difficult. There has been much conversation on how providers can establish appropriate boundaries, yet help meet patient needs for health education and support. The issue is not one quickly resolved for providers or consumers, but both sides need to consider what makes sense.

While many fear the transparency social media provides, the opportunity it allows can far outweigh the risks, if operated correctly. Listening to what your customers want and responding to those needs will help build the relationship and trust needed to carry on a dialogue and provide the resources necessary to best serve your customers, especially in the areas they are in most.

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