



## Use of Social Media for Allergy and Immunology Practices

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### Case Report

Social media is a web-based communication tool that enables people to interact with each other by sharing and consuming information, and now it has become part of our daily life. As of the first quarter of 2016, Facebook and Twitter have 1.65 billion and 310 million monthly active users worldwide, respectively [1,2]. Then social media is becoming a powerful tool for communicating to patients, other physicians and interacting with scientists across the world. For allergists and clinical immunologists, it is necessary to understand this new technology, utilize it to educate patients, collaborate and stay connected with colleagues and act as a promotion tool.

Twitter is a microblogging platform that uses 140-character tweets to rapidly share small amounts of information. It can be used to disseminate information quite rapidly. For example, the Allergy, Asthma and Immunology annual meetings can be advertised on Twitter and a large number of allergists /clinical immunologists love tweeting this meeting, and sharing up-to-date and cutting-edge information. Allergists/clinical immunologists also personally use Twitter to share links of journal articles that they may be reading, and also share their thoughts on new items of the day. Many medical professionals' Twitter accounts have thousands of followers. The use of Twitter by allergists/clinical immunologists increased by 470% in one year (between 2011 and 2012) [3]. Allergy and Immunology was the first specialty to launch a Twitter Journal Club in 2008 [4], which were subsequently adopted by many other specialties as a global initiative [5]. The use of other social networking is also growing. Doximity is the largest professional network for US doctors, with more than 60% of physicians as members [6]; LinkedIn is used for allergist/clinical immunologist discussions on a variety of topics such as electronic medical records (EMR); medical services and links are shared on Google+.

Blogging is a way to expand a topic in more detail and with more comprehensiveness, comparing to Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. For example, if there is a popular medical topic that is spent in the news, allergists/clinical immunologists can use blog post to give their perspectives on the impact of that event on their patients and how it might impact patients' day-to-day lives. Also allergists/clinical immunologists can give their perspectives on a new journal article and explain how that might affect their patients in terms of food allergy management and asthma allergy management [7]. Some researchers put article on blog-based websites for patient and professional education that have gathered over 2.1 million page views since 2008 [8].

Youtube allows users to upload videos, and from allergist/clinical immunologist perspective, it is a visually engaging way to extend the reach beyond the clinic. So it allows medical professionals to give their usual patient education that they give somebody in person, and put it online. So if patients need to go back to website and look at it later to remind themselves of education that allergists/immunologists give them at clinic. It is always available to them 24/7. Millions of patients visit Youtube everyday with queries such as 'what triggers allergies?', 'how can we work to avoid allergens?', 'are there any natural solutions to help manage severe allergies?', etc. However, a considerable proportion of Youtube videos from nonprofessional education groups are misleading and even dangerous [9,10]. Patients should be educated to avoid and/or critically view low-quality videos posted by individual YouTube users who are not health professionals. Therefore, there is an urgent need for individual allergists/clinical immunologists and professional organizations to provide accessible and accurate information for patients and the general public via YouTube and other social media channels.

Finally, Facebook is a way, in my opinion, to engage patients and create conversations. Although none of these social media platforms should be used to offer direct medical advice, they are wonderful ways to share general medical information and keep patients and physicians constantly connected.

Social media is a great tool to stay connected with individuals' counterparts from all over the

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world. When one attends an annual conference, he/she may only meet his/her peers for a few days. But with social media, he/she can interact with a peer on almost a daily basis. That means they are able to provide better care for both their patients, because they are sharing ideas all the time, instead of once a year in a conference. That's very powerful. One can also collaborate with peers and talk about clinical trials and difficult cases under the circumstance that patient specific identifiers (e.g. name, phone number) are not disclosed.

Social media can also be used as a promotion tool. It is estimated that 70% of U.S. health care organizations use social media, with the most popular Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook [11,12]. Blogs are also used by many medical centers and hospitals [13]. Studies have shown that the use of social media can greatly enhance the image and visibility of an individual, medical center or hospital, and 57% of consumers tend to visit a hospital with a strong social media presence [11]. Such hospitals are interpreted by 81% of consumers as the hospitals offering cutting-edge technologies [11]. In another study, 12.5% of surveyed health care organizations said they had attracted new patients through the use of social media [12].

In summary, social networking is nothing new. Over the past few years, there is a rapid expansion of social media. Patients are often using platforms such as Twitter, blogging, Facebook and Youtube to engage their friends and family. Then allergists/clinical immunologists can also use these platforms to engage their patients and improve medical education. With the advance of technology, information can be disseminated faster, easier, and sometimes even better. To better inform and care for patients it is important that medical professionals embrace these advances.

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