

# The Past, Present, and Future of Professional Medical Communication

Presented by the  
American Society of  
Cosmetic Dermatology  
& Aesthetic Surgery

Helen M. Torok, MD; Heather L. Funk, MBA

Social networking sites (SNSs) are Web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.<sup>1</sup>

## The Early Years of SNSs

The first SNS, SixDegrees, launched in 1997. SixDegrees allowed users to create profiles, list their friends, and, beginning in 1998, surf friends' lists. From 1997 to 2001, a number of other SNSs, such as AsianAve, BlackPlanet, and MiGente, began supporting various combinations of profiles and friends.<sup>1</sup>

The next wave of SNSs began when Ryze was launched in 2001 to help people leverage their business networks. Similar SNSs, such as Tribe.net, Friendster, and LinkedIn were also introduced at this time.

## SNSs Hit the Mainstream

In 2003, SNSs hit the mainstream and, from this point on, many new SNSs were launched. MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo were developed. Currently, there are hundreds of SNSs with various technological affordances, supporting a wide range of interests and practices.

## Current Offerings and Development of Physician Social and Professional Networks

In the past, when a physician had a patient who was not responding to treatment or had a question about off-label

uses of a product, he or she was limited to calling colleagues or searching through other journals for possible answers.<sup>2</sup> However, with the introduction of the Internet, communication among physicians has changed. At first, there were e-mail groups and electronic list software (eg, listservs) for physicians, and then the emergence of blogs. Now, the latest trend is online social networking. Social networking is certainly the hot topic of today, with a new kind of social networking gaining traction among physicians. There are now physician-only communities where they can exchange ideas, opinions, and information about treatments with their peers.<sup>2</sup>

The Web site Sermo, which is Latin for *conversation*, was one of the first players in the physician-only community. WebMD recently became an SNS with Medscape Physician Connect. There are dozens of other communities popping up for certain specialties.<sup>2</sup>

## What Do Social and Professional Networks for Physicians Provide?

Social and professional networks for physicians provide them with the capability to improve their medical searches, review medical news and clinical research, read and start medical blogs, and create professional profiles.

## Use of Social and Professional Networks for Physicians

Although physician-only communities have not reached Facebook status, the number of physicians using these networks is rapidly growing. According to a Manhattan Research study of approximately 1800 physicians, more than half of physicians had used or were interested in using a physician-only online community.<sup>2</sup>

According to a new study published in the *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, SNSs are becoming more popular in medical school curricula. The study found that 45% of medical schools include SNSs in their curricula. The study also reported that 50% of medical schools plan to implement SNSs in their curricula in the upcoming year. A separate study conducted in 2007 found that

---

*Dr. Torok is Medical Director, Trillium Creek Dermatology and Aesthetic Center, Medina, Ohio, and Assistant Professor, Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine, Rootstown. Ms. Funk is CEO, Trillium Creek Dermatology and Aesthetic Center.*

*The authors report no conflicts of interest in relation to this article.*

*Correspondence: Dr. Helen Torok, MD (helenmtorok@aol.com).*

medical students and practitioners want more training on SNSs.<sup>3</sup>

### **Advantages of Social and Professional Networks for Physicians**

The ways physicians communicate, learn, and network have been changed by SNSs. For today's busy physicians, there are many advantages to using these online networks. These SNSs replace the traditional forms of networking that only took place at conferences and society events.

The many benefits of social and professional networks for physicians include finding and connecting with new or old colleagues; meeting physicians with common interests; exchanging knowledge; participating in discussions, forums, and blogs; discussing clinical cases; creating and managing their own forum or medical discussion topic; keeping on the pulse of upcoming trends; enlarging their professional network; and posting and finding medical jobs.

### **The Future of Social and Professional Networks for Physicians**

The trend of social and professional networks for physicians is well underway and this trend will continue with the launch of new SNSs that offer all of the tools and resources physicians need in one place. MDsConnect offers social networking; a professional network; medical discussions; blogs; forums; practice management solutions from management experts; journals and magazines; medical videos; and a marketplace where physicians can find and post jobs as well as sell or purchase products.

MDsConnect has partnered with Vivacare, an online resource for physicians, to provide tools to share practical health information and improve clinical care and increase patient satisfaction. Vivacare has partnered with *derm.md*, DrScore, and JournalReview to enhance their services. *Derm.md* aims to educate healthcare providers

using custom-designed software services. DrScore is a site where patients can rate their overall satisfaction with a physician. Physicians can then review these summaries and use them to improve their service. JournalReview allows physicians to read and rate articles as well as participate in discussion of current and past articles.

With the launch of these new sites and current partnership developments, social and professional networking for physicians has developed from simply being a way of conversing with colleagues to being a resource for finding solutions for practice management problems. This provides the tools and resources to give better clinical care and help a practice grow.

### **Conclusion**

Since 2003, SNSs have become more commonplace. Physician-only communities are becoming more popular and allow physicians to share ideas and information with their peers. They also provide physicians with the capabilities to improve medical searches, review medical news and clinical research, read and start medical blogs, and create professional profiles.

The number of physicians using physician-only networks is rapidly growing. Social and professional networks for physicians are increasing in popularity and this trend will continue with the launch of new sites that offer all of the tools and resources physicians need in one place.

### **References**

1. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication. Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>. Accessed August 25, 2009.
2. Manhattan Research. Facebook for physicians? physician use of social networks. <http://www.manhattanresearch.com/podcast/physicians-social-networks.aspx>. Accessed August 25, 2009.
3. iHealthBeat. Use of social networking tools growing in nursing, medical schools. <http://www.ihealthbeat.org/Articles/2009/7/13/Use-of-Social-Networking-Tools-Growing-in-Nursing-Medical-Schools.aspx>. Accessed August 25, 2009. ■