

Using Twitter in Clinical Education and Practice

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The Challenge

Faculty and residents are faced with many competing demands on their time, including the need to stay current with the literature and new clinical developments in the specialty. Using technologies available at one's fingertips allows us to stay current in our fields of interest as clinicians and educators but may seem overwhelming and intimidating at first. To address this challenge, we outline how Twitter can be used as a professional tool to efficiently stay up-to-date in medicine and education.

What Is Known

Twitter is a social media site created in 2006 that uses 140-character messages to share information and connects individuals using "@" and topics using "#" at <http://www.twitter.com>. The number of physicians using social media in a professional capacity is increasing, with physicians tweeting mainly during working hours,¹ averaging 1 in 8 medically related tweets (13%, or 1614 tweets from 237 medical professionals).² A 2011 survey of physicians found that 24% of respondents used social media daily and 61% weekly to explore online medical information.³ Many physicians, however, remain wary of social media's benefits in their clinical practice.²⁻⁴ Although others have delineated how to use Twitter for teaching learners in the classroom, those reviews do not describe use of Twitter for physicians' professional development and advancement.⁴

Why Use Twitter?

Twitter provides an immediate means of efficiently accessing current information for as much or as little time as the clinician can spare. Twitter is redefining the meaning of a "community of practice" as residents and faculty engage with others worldwide to:

- **Benefit Patients:** Physicians are using Twitter to track pandemics, alert clinicians about disasters, and keep

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Rip Out Action Items

1. Start a Twitter account.
2. Create a list to follow: "@" people, journals, programs; "#" hashtags for topics of interest.
3. Watch how others use these accounts by following their conversations.
4. Establish a digital footprint for your residency program.
5. Contribute to the online community by joining discussions.

up-to-date with health news worldwide. Physicians can engage each other and the public by opening the door to patient advocacy in controversial areas, such as immunizations.

- **Receive Continuous Development on Demand:** By selecting a medically and educationally focused list of people and organizations to follow on Twitter, one can quickly glean the most discussed topics and controversial subjects in a particular medical or educational realm, receive references to new publications from numerous medical and education journals (eg, @JournalofGME), or virtually attend conferences by following hashtags (eg, #ICRE2014). For a starter's guide of who to follow in the medical education field, please see the online supplemental material.
- **Advance Careers:** Twitter allows interaction with clinicians who might not be immediately available within one's traditional circles. For residents, such connections may be beneficial when looking for mentors and jobs.

How You Can Start TODAY

1. *Create your Twitter account(s):* Create a professional account, using a full name (not an eponym) and listing professional interests. You may choose to establish a second account for personal use. Note: Having a Twitter account does NOT mean you need to tweet.
2. *Develop a list of people to follow:* Spending time to determine who is on Twitter and what they tweet will assist in curating your Twitter feed to maximize the on-demand information you will receive. Seek out colleagues or experts, journals, and other medical or news organizations to bring the most personalized, relevant information to your feed. Many universities,

residency programs, and hospitals use Twitter to post updates and news. Search for colleagues in the Twitter search bar. Look for the “t” or bird icon on websites you frequent, linking to Twitter.

3. *Find the hashtags suited to your interests or discipline:* Hashtags (#) link together conversations around topics and themes. You can see what the world is saying about a topic simply by searching the “#<insert hashtag here>” in the Twitter search. Some common hashtags: #MedEd (medical education); #eol (end of life); #SoMe (social media); #hscsm (health care social media), #EMconf (emergency medicine resident conference days).
4. *The caveat:* Use of Twitter professionally comes with obligations: The Federation of State Medical Boards has published guidelines for social media use.⁵

What You Can Do LONG TERM

1. *Connect, contribute, and network:* After getting to know Twitter and forming a network, you can “join the conversation.” Post ideas through short, 140-character “bursts” of information and connect with like-minded colleagues in your field about topics of shared interest. Tweet links to new literature, add a hashtag to share it with a community of practice that shares your interests, or reach the public via a new avenue. In time, you might even develop a following of your own!
2. *Establish a digital footprint for your residency program:* The “Free Open Access Medical Education” (#FOAMed) movement has changed online education for clinicians. Predominantly mediated via Twitter, medical students to practicing physicians can access free

teaching resources. Residents and faculty in programs across North America have begun Tweeting from their rounds and teaching sessions (#EMConf, #IMConf), thereby helping an online medical community grow and encouraging their own professional development. Other programs use Twitter to promote and celebrate successes, run Twitter-based journal clubs, and engage faculty, residents, prospective match candidates, and the medical community-at-large (@UCMorningReport and @EmergMedOttawa). Increasing uptake of these social media accounts suggests that these practices are resonating with residents and pre-Match candidates and may be a metric for knowledge translation and academic contribution.

Resources

For more examples of people, journals, and organizations to follow, and a full list of references, see supplemental material online at jgme.org.

- 1 Chretien KC, Azar J, Kind T. Physicians on Twitter. *JAMA*. 2011;305(6):566–568.
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