Background

This poster provides a review of interim results from a qualitative study on first year medical students’ attitudes and perceptions of their definition of medical professionalism in social media.

Included in the study is an evaluation of changes in perspective since becoming a medical student and after participating in an E-Professionalism and Social Media instructional session.

Methods

- E-Professionalism and Social Media session held with first year medical students (January 2012)
- Session:
  - Students responded to audience response system questions reflecting on their social media usage and real-life examples of social media content (e.g., Facebook, blogs, Twitter) posted by health care professionals and students
  - Discussion about appropriate and inappropriate uses
  - Panel discussion with GW physicians who use social media
- Post-session reflection exercise
  - Students responded to specific prompts requesting them to reflect on their personal social media experiences, their interpretation of online medical professionalism and create a draft of social media guidelines.
- Study
  - 64 students consented to participate
  - Reflections were de-identified, and independently coded by two investigators to elicit themes. All four investigators met to reconcile codes and ensure inter-rater reliability.

Results

Multiple themes have emerged, summarized here by question.

Who are you representing online?

- Self, family, peers
- Medical profession
- University/employer

“Who am I representing online?”

- “When I go online, I am aware that I am representing myself, my family, my friends, my future career in medicine, and any institutions that I am associated with.”

- “I am going to be an MD doctor in about three and a half years and do not want my patients to come across me online and look at me in any other way than they did when we were in the anatomy lab.”

- “The information on my Facebook page represents the person I am, personally and professionally, and also my employees, high school, undergraduate university and GW medical school.”

What changes have you made to your social media presence since entering medical school?

- Made more private
- Changed content/photos
- Increased awareness
- No change

“Have you made any changes to your social media presence since entering medical school?”

- “I have made some privacy limitations on my Facebook page now, and I rarely post pictures from social outings. I more or less use my Facebook account to stay in touch with family and friends.”

- “Upon entering medical school, my social media identity has not changed very drastically. The main thing that I have done is to be more vigi...”

- “I have not really changed my professionalism online since medical school started because I always held it at some professional standard, but may rev...”

No changes planned already professional

- “I think my social media presence was fairly professional prior to the session, however, it definitely helped to reify the fact that the way I represent myself online does matter and can influence how people view me as a medical professional.”

- “this session has provided insight on the possible benefits and positive influence that social media can provide for the public including microaggressions in medicine and advocacy for various subjects in medicine. Social media only acts as a benefit when used appropriately with the idea of professionalism in mind.”

- “I really don’t have a significant social media presence to begin with. However, I might decide to even take down my only social media account, which is Facebook.”

How do you define e-professionalism?

- In other words, I would define e-professionalism as simply embodying the behavior of a professional online, including both words and actions.

If you were to draft a “social media guideline” for the incoming first-year class what would it look like?

- Google your name online and see what information comes up. If not like you, try to improve and remove any information that you do not like or approve of as soon as possible.

- Describe examples:
  - No recreational drugs, alcoholic beverages, nudity, breaking the law (in any way), or compromising photos
  - No personal or social trash talking about others

- Remove inappropriate content
  - “When I go online, I am aware that I am representing myself, my family, my friends, my future career in medicine, and any institutions that I am associated with.”

- Limit access
  - “I wish that I could...”

Conclusions

Medical students are consumers and producers of social media. Including online professionalism in the curriculum in this way with a focus on implication and best practices can help them develop an awareness of their professional presence in this electronic era.

This study hopes to inform the development of social media policies at medical schools. Additional data is being analyzed for a subsequent cohort of medical students.

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Alexandra Gomez, MSLS, MT; Gisela Butera, MLIS; Terry Kind, MD, MPH; Katherine Chretien, MD
The George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences