



Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust

drparthakar@gmail.com Follow Partha
on Twitter: @parthaskar

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THE BOTTOM LINE

Partha Kar: In praise of social media for doctors

Partha Kar *consultant in diabetes and endocrinology*

Social media can be a fascinating part of the medical world—an intriguing cocktail of joyousness and apathy, good and dark intentions, facts and counter facts. To some, this is something to be dismissed easily. Yet, over time and with easier access to the internet, social media platforms have also become places of dynamism and activism, where things can happen a lot more quickly than in traditional systems.

Social media can help us make friends, interact with fellow professionals, learn more about each other's challenges, and share details of studies and trials, while also rejoicing at others' successes or empathising with troughs in their professional or personal lives. For many, social media sites can be a place of solace, somewhere to spend time with friends—even if they're nameless or you haven't met them in person—away from our busy roles. They also provide a channel for people to create a profile and promote themselves.

In a policy space, the power of social media remains very much untapped. Without it, we simply wouldn't have had the progress we've seen in type 1 diabetes care in recent years—access to technology, awareness raising, and the gathering of like minded colleagues. Social media can also form the basis of a great deal of learning for people with type 1 diabetes. This progress would otherwise have been lost in the wheels of bureaucracy or in waiting for approvals from individuals who care more about organisational reputation. And much of this progress has been made in the NHS, with social media playing a pivotal part in enabling data transparency, highlighting problems and challenges, and allowing patients to interact and raise subjects. Such a powerful medium also helps to counter the “let's take this offline” narrative of people who don't like public discussion of their failures and prefer obfuscation and gaslighting.

I can't think of any other medium that can draw attention to a lack of access to technology so quickly and help bring speedy resolution when cases of discrimination gain wide support. Yet the darker side of social media is always just a whisker away. Nuance is lost, aggressive attitudes emerge, misinformation spreads like wildfire, and personal attacks abound. This shows what I've always believed—that NHS staff are no less racist, homophobic, or misogynous than the rest of society. Some people make their medical accounts anonymous, probably to hide from vexatious referrals to the General Medical Council or their employer. When that anonymity is used as a shield to attack colleagues, however, this may reflect broader problems in the working culture of medicine, the NHS, or healthcare.

I'd recommend that everyone in medicine should engage with social media, to learn, interact, and counteract misinformation. My engagement has brought me some personal attacks and abuse. Yet it's also brought me much joy and success in the areas I've focused on. My social media output now mostly involves cascading information, interacting with people I may be able to help, and posting pics of my wonderful dogs.

To people in policy roles, I'd say that, if you don't think that you need social media to craft policy and ideas, you're not interacting enough with those whose lives you try to influence. Social media can be a forum for listening, interacting, being brave as a leader, accepting failings, and showing your human side. You'll gain more respect by showing your fallibility than by limiting yourself to carefully crafted lines on social media.

Interact with individuals who share common values, listen to people with opposing views, and move on, if a particular attempt to broaden your world jars too much. The intention to “stay outside your echo chambers” is right—yet not at the expense of listening to those with views that are racist, sexist, or similar, causing hurt and angst to your wellbeing.

Find accounts to follow that inspire you or make you smile. And take breaks from social media when you can: I now do, simply because the world outside has much to smile at too.

Competing interests: www.bmj.com/about-bmj/freelance-contributors. Partha Kar is national specialty adviser, diabetes, and lead of the Medical Workforce Race Equality Standard.

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