

Distracted doctoring - is it really a concern?

February 8 2012, By Dr. Runjhun Misra

Q: Facebook? Twitter? Gmail? A: None of the above.

Recently, there has been an increased discussion in hospitals and medical schools on “distracted doctoring,” a practice where patient care might be compromised due to the frivolous use of [smart devices](#) for non-medical purposes.

When physicians take the Hippocratic Oath at the beginning of their training, they are sworn to always do good and never knowingly do harm to a patient. To adhere to that oath, it is critical to be mentally present during all clinical encounters or you may miss a critical, life-impacting piece of information.

It is with that mindset that physicians always strive to pay the utmost attention during any patient-physician contact. Sure, smart devices might be used during that encounter, but always with the intention of furthering medical care giving. For instance, using an application on the smart phone to figure out the dose of a medication, or searching Pubmed to look up a study that the patient heard about.

For this article, I conducted my own informal poll among the dozens of clinicians I know and asked them whether they were ever distracted by a device for their own personal use. Responding to the survey, 100 percent of local physicians answered that during active times of patient care delivery, they were never on a smart device surfing non-medical websites.

As with anything, technology is a double-edged sword. On one side, it has the ability to advance medical care and provide data instantaneously – often leading to better [patient care](#). On the other, it does have the potential to distract physicians while they directly interact with patients. What physicians choose to do with new mobile technology is solely at their discretion, although it's vital to stress that most don't allow themselves the privilege of getting distracted. Distraction, in this profession, wouldn't just mean an erasable mistake, it could cost a life.

Like the Sirens were to Odysseus, smart devices are to physicians. They might lure the weak, but with each patient they see, [physicians](#) ward off the advances of [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and Gmail and push forward to [UpToDate](#), where better medical judgments can be attained. Even though thousands of years have passed, bringing with them greater and more alluring distractions, I think Hippocrates would be pleased with most of his disciples today.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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