

Twitter the right prescription for sharing health research, study says

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Julie Robillard is a neurology professor at UBC's National Core for Neuroethics and Djavad Mowafaghian Centre for Brain Health. Credit: Julie Robillard

Using Twitter can help physicians be better prepared to answer questions from their patients, according to researchers from the University of British Columbia.

The study, presented today at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), finds more and more [health care professionals](#) are embracing social media. This challenges common opinion that physicians are reluctant to jump on the social media bandwagon.

"Many people go online for health information, but little research has been done on who is participating in these discussions or what is being shared," says Julie Robillard, lead author and neurology professor at UBC's National Core for Neuroethics and Djavad Mowafaghian Centre for Brain Health.

Robillard and fourth-year psychology student Emanuel Cabral spent six months monitoring conversations surrounding stem cell research related to spinal cord injury and Parkinson's disease on Twitter. They found roughly 25 per cent of the tweets about spinal cord injury and 15 per cent of the tweets about Parkinson's disease were from health care professionals.

The study found the majority of tweets were about research findings, particularly the ones perceived as medical breakthroughs. The most shared content were links to research reports.

The study also found the users tweeting about spinal cord injury and Parkinson's disease differed. Users who tweeted about spinal cord injury talked about clinical trials, while users who tweet about Parkinson's disease mostly talked about new tools or methods being developed to conduct research.

Less than five per cent of the [tweets](#) spoke out against [stem cell research](#), which surprised the researchers.

"We expected to see debate on stem cell controversy," says Robillard. "But people are sharing ideas of hope and expectations much more than anything else."

Robillard believes [social media](#) can help physicians become more aware of what their patients are consuming about scientific research beyond traditional media. This could help temper patients' expectations about potential treatments.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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