Finding support for surgery on Facebook

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For many, Facebook connects friends, family, and others with common interests. Despite the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook, scientists are only beginning to learn how they affect human interaction.

In a recent study published by the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, Dartmouth researchers examined nearly 9,000 Facebook conversations to better understand how people seek and receive support on social networking sites.

"Among the many Facebook conversations that were mostly casual, we noticed more serious exchanges among people who mentioned a major medical event, such as surgery," says Denise Anthony, professor of sociology at Dartmouth.

The study examined Facebook conversations among approximately 33,000 people who gave permission to be monitored for a six-month period. During this period, nearly four thousand people posted something about surgery. When the researchers examined the conversations where the initial posts mentioned surgery, they discovered that posts referencing a family member triggered much greater response via comments on that post. The researchers also reported a common pattern of call-and-response in asking for and offering prayers.

"In our data, many individuals talking about surgery would ask for prayers in their initial post. These posts received more responses in the form of digital prayers in reply," says Anthony.

While the study is just the first step in directly observing social support on Facebook, the researchers say that future studies are needed to understand how support garnered on social networking sites translates to the real world.

"Our research suggests that resources in the offline world that are associated with greater social support and better health outcomes, like income, appear to translate into greater social support online as well," says Anthony. "It is important to understand such patterns, because if inequality in the offline world translates into differential resources online, especially those that affect health over time, then new technologies like social network sites could exacerbate rather than reduce health disparities."

The interdisciplinary research team consisted of Anthony and her colleagues Matthew Davis, an epidemiologist now at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Scott Pauls, professor of mathematics at Dartmouth.

Provided by Dartmouth College