Study looks at social media impact on mental healthcare, treatment

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Tweet it. Snap it. Pin it. Post it...or however else you want to share it with the masses scouring the Internet searching for common ground connectivity. But, should doctors peer behind the privacy curtain of potential patients to help avert or discover more severe problems?

University Hospitals Case Medical Center Psychiatrist Stephanie Pope, MD, examined the impact of social media on mental health care and treatment. She specifically investigated how the public forums could help diagnoses in clinical practice as well as serving as behavioral predictors. Her analysis also delves into the ethical aspects of patient/doctor relationships utilizing social media outlets which are becoming more and more prevalent in adolescent populations.

Her findings were enlightening. Aside from the societal increase and prevalence of social media, Dr. Pope discovered that doctors and patients sometimes blur lines of their relationships. Instances where social media research of patients in treatment helped to prevent injury were recorded, while definitive, institutional policy and procedures were sorely lagging causing potential issues in patient care.

Dr. Pope will present the study, "Social Media and Psychiatry" at the American Psychiatric Association Meeting in May in Toronto. She surveyed psychiatrists and psychologists to better understand social media significance, impact as well as particular guidelines and ethics associated with patient/doctor relationships.

She also examined the trios of ethical, professional and legal considerations on social platforms as it pertains to their collective work and personal lives meshing together sometimes creating ambiguous and complex interactions between health professionals and patients.

"This study was conducted as an effort to demonstrate the clinical implications of social media and form an understanding of the legal and ethical consequences of social media within practice," said Pope. "Institutions across the country lack protocols relating to the media forms and professional guidelines need to be established."

The numbers associated with social media usage are staggering. In 2013, Facebook alone had 751 million users while Twitter continued to surge with 555 million accounts that averaged 58 million tweets every day. The amount of personal information such as photos, hometown information and cell phone numbers are easily accessible online. Additionally, new mediums continued to surface as well where people share information such as Snapchat and Instagram.

The statistics and data don't necessarily get risky until they enter into the personal health realm where 60 percent of patients are seeking support, knowledge and information about their own health utilizing social media platforms.

The medical community has followed suit with the trending numbers of social media users.

According to a study in 2008, 64 percent of medical students and 13 percent of residents were active on Facebook and of that percentage only 37 percent of those active kept their profiles private, away from potential patients. Most recently, the data showed a substantial spike in active profiles held by doctors and medical students with almost 90 percent maintaining some sort of social media accounts.

Dr. Pope's research noted that doctors and patients can effectively use the social forums to help their conditions, find support and while selecting the best options for care. Additionally, doctors can use social media for a number of positive aspects, but that clear, definable protocols should be set in place.
Dr. Pope's also focused her research and analyzed social media's impact on her area of expertise and found alarming statistics relating to suicidal ideations, behaviors and specific illnesses. Most importantly, the validation of social media aiding in treatment and being clinically relevant became obvious.

"We need to understand the magnitude that social media is having on our clinical practice but at the same time we need to develop patient/doctor boundaries," said Dr. Pope. "When a patient comes to the emergency room and has had thoughts about suicide, social media channels can help ...but how, when and if can use this information is at the core of the argument."

Provided by University Hospitals Case Medical Center

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