This quick guide aims to help new communications staff in the NHS understand what’s driving the use of social media in the NHS. We explore three areas:

— patient empowerment
— peer-to-peer support and expert patients
— leadership via digital channels.

Key points

— Social media is a great way to collect patients’ feedback on NHS services.
— Peer-to-peer support networks have developed on social media sites. Patients are able to network with others experiencing their condition or symptoms.
— By using social media, senior NHS leaders are able to interact with staff, patients and the public in one space, which has helped flatten hierarchy in the NHS.
Patient empowerment – a patient-centric approach to healthcare

Since the Mid Staffordshire Inquiry [see box], a consistent message has been repeated across the NHS: put patient experience at the centre of everything we do.

The move towards a patient-centred approach to care has generated interest in how patients are able to feed back to the NHS.

Conversations between patients, the public and NHS are all forms of feedback. These conversations offer a potentially rich source of insight and experience for the NHS to integrate into its healthcare commissioning and delivery decisions. For example, what do diabetes patients think of having to go into clinics? Do they have good ideas on how to improve diabetes care? They do!

See nurse Annie Cooper’s excellent open letter to the NHS about her diabetes care.

NHS England is working at a national level on using various forms of social media feedback to build a picture of how patients see the NHS. At a local level, NHS trusts are using services such as Patient Opinion to answer patient comments and complaints, and using Twitter and Facebook to collect the public’s views on a variety of services.

Peer-to-peer support and expert patients

Using social media, patients are able to network with others experiencing their condition or symptoms, wherever they are in the world. They share their experiences of following different drug regimes, recommend the best clinicians in their field and help each other with the psychological aspects of their conditions. All of this is done outside of the NHS, often without any official clinical support.

The online peer-to-peer support networks which have developed on Twitter, Facebook, Health Unlocked and health charity forums have challenged the NHS in three ways:

1. They have challenged the model of delivering healthcare support in buildings [outpatients’ clinic, GP surgery].
2. They have shown patients to be healthcare experts too, especially those with long-term conditions.
3. Expert patients have rebalanced the hierarchy of the clinician-patient relationship, leading to calls for a more collaborative approach between clinicians and [expert] patients.

Michael Seres, a bowel transplant patient, is an excellent example of how an expert patient can help other patients and the NHS deliver services that are better for both.

The Mid Staffordshire Inquiry in 60 words

In 2008, it was found patients at the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust had been regularly neglected.

A public inquiry into the failings at the trust was conducted by Robert Francis QC. The Francis report was published in February 2013.

Among the 290 recommendations was a consistent theme to value patient feedback and complaints to improve the delivery of care.
Leadership via digital

Using social media, senior NHS leaders are able to interact with staff, patients and the public in one space. This has helped flatten the hierarchy of the NHS – you no longer need to book a meeting with the CEO, just Tweet them. In turn, this has helped NHS leadership become more transparent, which is important in order to have necessary conversations with the public on how to keep the NHS sustainable.

Social media has also had an impact on NHS leaders who don’t use it. Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England, may not be on Twitter or write blogs, but commentators from the media, patients, NHS staff and politicians all are. His leadership is viewed through a digital lens as these groups comment and discuss his strategies, speeches and healthcare select committee appearances on social media sites.

#socialpioneers

Leadership doesn’t always mean being the chief executive; NHS staff from all levels are leading their fields on social media. A list of social pioneers in healthcare has been compiled to showcase those whose blogs, posts and Tweets influence and provide debate and drive change.

Where to find out more about social media in the NHS

If you’re interested in finding out more about social media in the NHS, look through these online communities and our selection of social media guidance, including A social media toolkit for the NHS.

#nhssm – discussions every Wednesday on social media use in the NHS.

#wenurses,
#wePharmacists,
#welDNurses and more – weekly discussions specific to different healthcare professions.

You’ll find lots of useful resources here: www.nhsemployers.org/socialmedia

Further reading

www.nhsemployers.org/socialmedia

Increasing staff engagement with social media, November 2013.
NHS Employers

The NHS Employers organisation is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first. Our vision is to be the authoritative voice of workforce leaders, experts in HR, negotiating fairly to get the best deal for patients.

We help employers make sense of current and emerging healthcare issues to ensure that their voice is front and centre of health policy and practice. We keep them up to date with the latest workforce thinking and expert opinion, providing practical advice and information, and generating opportunities to network and share knowledge and best practice.

We work with employers in the NHS to reflect their views and act on their behalf in four priority areas:

- pay and negotiations
- recruitment and planning the workforce
- healthy and productive workplaces
- employment policy and practice.

The NHS Employers organisation is part of the NHS Confederation.

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