The Value Of Social Media In Inflammatory Bowel Diseases

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Background

An increasing number of patients with chronic illnesses, including inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD), are turning to social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook to share about their conditions. The use of social media in healthcare promotes patient engagement, communication, and education, while enabling providers to better recognize patient interests and increase their online visibility for patient recruitment. This study aims to describe the strategies and experiences of an IBD tertiary referral center to develop a social media presence among patients using Twitter and Facebook and its outcomes after one year.

Methods

A Twitter profile and Facebook page were established for the IBD center. Analytic tools Twitonomy and Facebook Insights were used to capture data on posts, including the data media format. Information on Twitter followers and Facebook users who liked the center’s Facebook page was acquired. The number of recognizable patients with IBD and the online topics of interest to social media users were tracked and categorized manually.

Results

Within the first 15 months, a total of 2212 Twitter users began following our Twitter account, and 469 Facebook users liked the center’s Facebook page. The growth in the number of Twitter followers and those who liked the center’s Facebook page was proportionate to the number of posts per week. Among Twitter followers, 971 (44%) were IBD patients, of which 6 were patients from our IBD center. Twitter users retweeted and favorited IBD-related topics more frequently than non-IBD topics. The most popular retweeted Twitter topics were risk factors (70% retweeted), surgery (63% retweeted), and complications/symptoms (62% retweeted). The most commonly favorited Twitter topics were about sex/fertility (43% favorited). For Facebook, the most frequently liked posts were about the center’s specific IBD programs (92% liked, 5.9 likes per post), value in healthcare (90% liked, 5.3 likes per post), and therapies (91% liked, 5.3 likes per post). The Facebook posts that drew the most comments were posts on diet (67% commented on, 2.7 comments per post). Photographs were the most liked media format of postings (90% liked, 7.9 likes per photograph).

Conclusion

Twitter and Facebook are valuable tools to interact with patients who are part of the greater online community. Disease-specific information was most popular among social media users, and photographs were the most popular media format. Despite the low patient recruitment over the first year, we demonstrated that patients were engaged and communicated through social media about their disease, which can be viewed as additional measures of return on investment from social media programs in healthcare.